

January 15¢

PRIVATE DETECTIVE

IND
STORIES



THREE WOMEN *and a* CORPSE

by

Roger
Torrey



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PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES

January, 1943

Vol. 12, No. 2

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The names and descriptions of all characters appearing in this magazine are entirely fictitious. If there is any resemblance either in name or description, to any living person, it is purely a coincidence.

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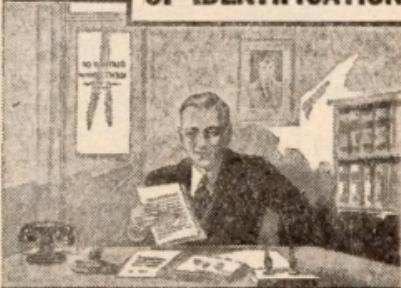
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By ROGER TORREY



I wouldn't have known the girl from a bar of soap—but she knew me, and enlisted my aid. I should have known there was something screwy about it when she never made clear what she wanted me to do—but, they say, love is blind!

6



T LEAST sixty people were shouting merrily above the blare of the juke box and half of them were trying to dance. I was trying, not very hard, to hear what Kenny Hardin was saying, and doing my best to keep an eye on the prettiest girl I'd ever seen.

Kenny bawled: "They oughta turn that damn' thing down.



Kenny said, "I've seen 'em messy, but this one classes right up by the top."

Three Women and a Corpse

"They should," I said.

The girl caught my eye and smiled mistily at me.

"There ought to be a law against 'em," Kenny said. "They're worse than slot machines. People start playing 'em and they can't stop."

"Not here, anyway," I said.

"Here" was the Belhaven Hotel at Carolina Beach, specifically the Tap Room of the Belhaven Hotel.

"I'm going to have another drink or go nuts listening to that thing,"

Kenny roared. "I can't hear myself think."

"You're on a vacation so what difference does it make," I shouted back, watching the pretty girl dancing our way. "Order me one, too."

CAROLINA BEACH had beer joints and a State ABC store, but the Belhaven operated under a

club license and you could bring in your own liquor and order set-ups. Your bottle was kept at the bar and numbered—and in theory the hotel guests were the only ones allowed the privilege. It didn't work that way in practice as the local party hounds had their bottles side by side with the guests, and took up as much space at the tables and on the two-penny dance floor.

Kenny waved one of the colored boys toward our table and the pretty girl danced right by us. She nodded toward the juke box and shrieked: "Good band!"

I shouted back: "Sousa had a louder one."

She smiled at me over her partner's shoulder and two jitter-bugging young fools got between us. She'd been near enough for me to see how blue her eyes were—and that they were hazy from too much to drink. She'd been even prettier, close-up.

The hand I saw against her partner's coat showed a ruby and emerald dinner ring as big as a Christmas tree decoration, but her nails were tinted only lightly pink. Her blond hair was bobbed long and turned under and held just the slightest wave. Kenny said it all when he spoke—and it took him a minute to get his breath before he could.

"My God!" he said. "A dream!"

I said: "All that and more."

"And she spoke to you."

"She did."

"With me here."

"In spite of that."

Kenny looked hurt and the waiter brought the drinks. I had just time to take a swallow before some addict put another nickel in the ma-

chine, and I got up and over to the pretty girl's table in a hurry. I didn't want to arrive just as she danced off with another man.

She was with a party of six and the man with her was an ugly-looking customer. Big and boisterous, with a sneering way of looking around, and, as I found out, with a sneering way of talking.

I bowed and said: "May I have this dance?"

She said, startling me: "Why I'd love it, Mr. Haley. I just knew you'd remember me."

"Of course I did," I said.

UP TO that evening I'd never seen her before in my life. A man couldn't call himself one if he could forget a girl like that.

The man with her gave me an ugly look and started to take over. "Look here, Haley, if that's your name. You're interfering with a private party."

I said: "Oh, don't give it a thought. I'm sure I don't mind."

The girl stood up quickly and said: "Now, Charley! Behave! Shall we, Mr. Haley?"

Mr. Haley should and did. I'm no shucks as a dancer—I still dip like they used to do in the dark ages—but she made it seem like I was another Fred Astaire. It was like one of those dreams where the angels float around the sky with you, fanning you with their feathers.

She said:

"I'm glad you asked me to dance."

"So'm I," I said.

"If you hadn't, I'd have had to go to your table and pretend we'd met before."

"Why?"

"Because I have to talk to you."

"Again why?"

"You're Gib Haley, aren't you? The detective who shot those three men, in the city, a month ago?"

"Well, yes."

KENNY HARDIN had been with me but he hadn't got any advertising from the fracas. Kenny's a police lieutenant, and the city papers happened to be against the administration and the police chief, and everyone under him.

So I got a lot of publicity and Kenny got half the reward—the three men had been holding up a chain grocery when Kenny and I happened to be walking by and stopped it. They were all bad—all had records and a price on their heads, and they elected to shoot it out. Kenny is high man on the police pistol team and I'm half-handy with a hand gun myself, so it worked out very nicely for us and the other way for them.

I said: "It was just one of those things that happen. Mr. Hardin, the man at the table with me, was along. He's a police officer; he did more than I did in the mess."

"But you're a private detective?"

"That's right."

"And you could work for me, while he couldn't?"

"That's right, too."

"That's what I want to see you about."

"Well, I'm supposed to be on a vacation."

"Please, Mr. Haley. It's so important."

If she'd asked me to take off from the Brooklyn Bridge in that tone

of voice, I'd have been jumping.

I said: "Sure, Miss. Anything you want."

"It's Jane Garr, Mr. Haley. Just Jane."

"Then it's just Gib."

"I've got the C-suite on the third floor, Gib. Will you come up about an hour after the Tap Room closes?"

"Alone, or should I bring Mr. Hardin?"

"Oh, alone."

I should have known right then that there was something sour about the deal.

THE C-suites were the hotel's best, and that was saying quite a lot. The Belhaven catered to a strictly moneyed crowd, and was built and operated accordingly. Jane Garr led me into the sitting room and waved at a chair and at a stand table by it that held bottles, ice, soda, and glasses, and asked me to do the honors.

"Make me one, too," she said. "I—think I need one."

One more, in the shape she was in, was just another two pounds added to a ton. She was tighter than a tick, but she apparently wasn't one of the sloppy drunks. She was steady on her feet and she didn't stammer, but she had difficulty when she tried to focus on me.

I looked doubtful and she said quickly: "Oh, it's all right. I won't get any drunker than I am now."

I didn't believe this but I made her a highball—cutting the liquor pretty low. She came to the table and added more to the drink, and gave me a bit of her philosophy.

"Never send a boy to do a man's

work," she said. "That's what my father always used to say."

"It's a thought," I said.

"Dad was, Tommy Garr. *The Tommy Garr.*"

I started to say something and stopped. Tommy Garr had been one of the mid-West bootleg barons and he'd gone out in a blaze of light. He'd been shot down in a crowded night club with five hundred people looking on, and they'd never caught his killers. They hadn't tried very hard—the cops figured it was a dog-eat-dog thing and pretty well passed their investigation.

She said: "I see you knew him."

"Knew of him."

"I grew up with him. That's how I know who's here in the hotel."

"Yes?"

"I'm visiting my aunt and uncle—they run the hotel. And I've recognized half a dozen men who, well, were against dad. Gangsters. I know I'm right."

"If the police have nothing against them now, they've got a right to be here."

"There's Charley Thomas—the man I was with tonight. There's Pietro Arlini—he was at the table, too, only he calls himself Pete Arlen now. There's Jackie Collins. He's the thin dark man that was with us. The two girls with them, well, the less said about them the better."

"I see, Miss Garr."

"It's Jane."

"All right. I see, Jane."

"But you don't. Uncle Harry's made an actual issue about me being nice to these people. I don't know why—I can't understand it."

"Well, I can't either. I'd say that was between you and your uncle."

And then she said: "But I'm afraid to talk to Uncle Harry about it. You see, ever since he killed the man, he's been a little crazy."

It was then that Kenny Hardin knocked on the door and told me about the shooting down the beach. Like a fool I'd told him where I'd be.

CHAPTER II

The Ladies—God Bless Them!



T HAD been over a card game in a cottage a quarter mile down the beach, and the dead man was Jackie Collins. One of the party that had been with Jane Carr when they'd been in the taproom.

Everything was all in order—they'd had time to fix the scene. Collins was draped over his chair, head and arms on one side, and balanced there on his middle. He had a .25 automatic in one hand and it had been fired once, and Pete Arlen, nee Pietro Arlini, had a gouge across a forearm, where the little slug had grazed him. It didn't mean a thing—he could have held the little gun in a hand towel and shot himself, so that a self-defense plea would stand up. Or he could have had one of his pals do the deed for him.

Collins had been drilled three times with a .38 Special Colt, and the gun, a Police Positive, was on the card table. It was Arlini's of course, and he claimed Collins drew and shot him, and that he was forced to go for the iron to protect himself.

Collins had his three holes right up his left side and in line, one through and the other two just under and over his heart. He'd died on his feet.

They had a swell story and there wasn't a chance to push holes in it. There were too many witnesses. They'd been five in the game. Collins, Arlini, Charley Thomas, who'd been with Jane Garr and who'd been ugly with me, and two others. These two were the same stripe—one a bird named Ollie Schect and the other named Hermie Leyendecker. Five tough hustlers, and any one of them would have gone for murder like a cat goes for sweet milk. That is, if murder paid.

KENNY HARDIN looked over the place and said: "If you gentlemen don't mind, I'll take over until either the State or County cops take over. I'll take over whether you like it or not, so you might as well put up with it. Do I hear no?"

Charley Thomas said: "You hear no. Who the hell are you, big mouth?"

Hardin grinned and said: "I'm a lieutenant of police in the city. I haven't got one damn' bit of authority down here except this. But it's good, boys—it's just *awful* good."

He took a sap from his back pocket and started tapping it on the palm of his other hand.

Thomas looked sour and said: "A lousy copper!"

Kenny took a step ahead and said: "Maybe I didn't hear that right? Maybe I'd better hear you say you made a little error?"

He put his left hand out and caught a handful of Thomas' sport shirt and went back on the toes of his right foot, ready with the sap.

Thomas said: "My mistake!"

There were half a dozen extra people there, including Harry Garr,



Kenny said, "Maybe I better hear you say you made a little error."

Jane's uncle, and he made himself spokesman. I suppose he rated because of operating the hotel.

He said: "I'm sure it will be all right for you to take charge, Mr. Hardin."

Kenny said: "It had better be."

And that was that, until the State cops got there two hours later. They agreed it looked like self-defense and took the remaining four card players to the county seat, to make their statements. They'd have to hold Arlini, or Arlen, for the Grand Jury, but they seemed to expect him to go clear the minute he appeared before that august body.

From the conversation, I judged that self-defense was an ideal plea to take in that section of the country—that with any proof of it at all you were cleared and in a hurry.

Probably a result and an aftermath of the old feuding code, because there'd been some famous ones in that country years before.

HARRY GARR was a fat, bald-headed man. He had pale blue eyes that held no expression at all, and he had that beaming hotel man smile that didn't mean a thing. His wife, Jane's aunt, was a honey. She was twenty years younger than Harry—I'd say about twenty-five, and she made me think of Barbara La Marr, in the old silent pictures. Big and dark and sultry looking, with her eyes set a little bit aslant.

Every time she looked at you it was as though she'd whispered in your ear.

She was with Jane when Kenny and I went into the dining room the next morning, and Jane called us over and introduced us.

"That was a terrible thing last night," Jane's aunt said.

I said: "Oh, not so bad, Mrs. Carr. It would be a kindness and a blessing if all five of 'em had shot it out and made it a massacre. It'd save the good taxpayers a lot of dough."

"I don't understand."

"It's just a question of time before the State tries 'em and hangs 'em," explained Kenny. "Mr. Haley means it would save the State the expense of a trial."

Mrs. Garr didn't look as though she thought I'd been at all funny. Nor did Jane—Jane looked frightened.

I said: "I'd like to try a little surf fishing, but I didn't bring any tackle."

"I'm sure Harry can fit you and Mr. Hardin out," said Mrs. Garr. "He does that often. But you gentlemen will have to be careful—the beach is closed from half an hour before sunset to sunrise, you know. Because of the war and the subma-

rines, you see. The Coast Guard and the Army have patrols up and down the beach, and they're liable to shoot first and ask questions afterward, if they think you're suspicious characters."

"We'll watch it," Kenny promised.

I asked: "Did the five that were in the card game come down here together?"

"I believe so. It was terrible—I don't believe men who play cards should have guns with them. So often there's trouble."

I agreed with: "There should be a law against it," and we went on to our table.

KENNY said: "A nice dish. I wonder how come she married a human mistake like that Garr. You know who he is, don't you, Gib?"

I said I didn't.

"He was in partners with a guy—I forgot his name and it doesn't matter—it was some kind of a wholesale importing business or something as I recall — and they got in the same kind of a jam. When they were alone in their office. It turned out the same way—Garr got nicked and the other guy got dead."

I said: "The kid told me that uncle had been cracked ever since he'd killed a man."

"He did ten years, with good time off for it. That's what probably touched him up."

"She didn't tell me that."

"Who'd brag about a jail bird uncle?"

We left it at that and ordered breakfast. And still I didn't have much idea what Jane wanted to hire me for!



It's automatic, when all is quiet, to
keep your eyes on action.

THE beach shelved off in a dip that rose to a sand bar possibly a hundred yards from the beach proper. The bar seemed to hold the same distance right along the coast, and it could almost be seen at low tide. Then there was never over a foot of water covering it and, sometimes when a roller would strike it right, you'd see the sand in the smother of foam. In the dip, between it and the beach, the water averaged around five feet in depth. The surf would hit that outer bank

and break, then roll on and to the beach.

It was all dunes—some of them held from shifting by that coarse beach grass but the bulk of them alive, changing shape and size with each wind of any velocity. The beach itself wasn't far from where the Wright brothers built their aeroplane and flew it—and it stretched its desolate way down to Oregon Inlet, some few miles down the coast and up for seventy miles, up and into Virginia.

The surf fishing should have been ideal—and was, except that neither Kenny or I could catch any fish. We tried in the dip, fishing short. We waded out to the bar and tried beyond it, and all we got was tired. And two hours later we were sitting on the beach, thoroughly disgusted, with the start of either tan or sunburn, and with both of us wanting a drink.

It was then the colored boy who'd waited on us in the Tap Room the night before came up. He was very black and the grin he gave us was almost scary. His teeth were so white they looked false.

"I was looking for you gentlemen," he said.

"You found us," Kenny told him.

"The ladies, they want to see you."

"What ladies?"

"One of 'em's Miss Betty. Other is Miss Flo."

Kenny considered this and sighed. "That's the way," he said. "Any time a gal looks for me it's a mistake. I don't know anybody named either Betty or Flo. You tell 'em, George, that there's some mistake. Then you bring us a tray with six highballs on it—they'll know the number on our bottle, in the bar."

"Yes, sir! Six highballs?"

Kenny leaned forward and said, making it impressive: "Sure! Six of 'em; You want to know something, George? A secret?"

"Yes, sir!"

"It's this. Mr. Haley and I aren't like other men. You know what I mean?"

"No, sir."

"Well, we've each got three stomachs, just like cows have three stomachs. We've got to have a highball for each stomach."

GEORGE showed us more teeth than I thought could grow in a human mouth and guffawed. "That's cute—that's mighty cute. Six highballs. Yes, sir! But Mr. Hardin, sir! Them ladies they know you, all right. They tell me you and Mr. Haley by name, they did. They say they are in room four hundred and twelve and they ask you gentlemen to come up, if you please."

"I'll still take the six highballs," Kenny said. "Women leave me cold. That is, right at this moment."

George went away and we discussed just what was the matter with the fishing, deciding finally that it was the same complaint that's common all over the country. The fish just wouldn't cooperate with us. It was lazy and nice, there on the beach in the hot sun, and so we weren't prepared to see our colored boy coming back to us in leaps and bounds. He came over the rise that sheltered us from the hotel running like an antelope and, I swear, covering ground as fast.

Kenny said: "Somebody built a fire under him—no boy could run that fast without artificial stimulation. Whee! Look at him come!"

"I don't see any drinks," I said.

"They're probably floating out in the air behind him. They'll catch up with him a few minutes after he gets here."

The boy came up and he was pale—I didn't believe colored people could fade like that but they can. He'd turned to a grayish, ashy shade, and his teeth were chattering as if he had a chill.

"'Fore God, gentlemen," he panted out. "'Fore God! That lady, she's right on the floor. I knocked, and 'fore God, the door sort of opened and there she was."

"Who?" asked Kenny.

"Miss Flo. She's all over blood."

"What about the other one?"

The colored boy shook his head and said he hadn't seen Miss Betty. That he'd taken one look at Miss Flo and run like hell for us.

I said: "Then you didn't stop and tell anybody about it?"

"No, *sir!* I knows you gentlemen are officers, so I come and tell you first."

"You close the door after you?"

"Honest, I do know."

"Four twelve, did you say?"

"Yes, *sir.* Four twelve."

I said to Kenny: "You might as well start taking that surf rod down. You're not going to do any more fishing today."

"I wasn't catching anything anyway," Kenny grumbled. "It's a hell of a vacation—it's a damn' crime wave down here and we walked right into it."

The colored boy said: "Yes, *sir!*"

CHAPTER III

The Knife



E STOPPED at the Tap Room to get strength before going up to four twelve and ran into Harry Garr, there for the same purpose. Garr gave us his stock, beaming smile and his stock, cold glare and waved his glass at us in invitation.

"You boys do any good?" he asked.

"We got the start on a swell mess of sunburn," Kenny told him. "Just that and no more. No fish."

"It's like that sometimes," Garr sympathized. "Maybe the next time you'll slay 'em."

The Tap Room opened into the lobby and right then we saw the three murder witnesses of the night before come in, followed by a State policeman. The three headed for the bar like homing pigeons, with the copper lounging after them and shaking his head in an apparent refusal of a drink. They're not supposed to take a drink while on duty and he was taking the rule seriously. I spoke under my breath to Kenny, who was guzzling his drink as though he'd been lost for days in a desert.

"Opper-copper," I said. "Maybe we should take him upstairs?"

Kenny looked at me over the rim of his glass and shook his head without stopping his steady swallowing. He put the glass down, when it was empty, and explained himself.

"We ask him up," he said, "and the guy'll take over and we won't find out what the score is. We look it over ourselves, and then we call in. This isn't State cop stuff, Gib—it's city stuff, even if we happen to be out in the country. You know that."

I said I knew it. Charley Thomas looked over at us and nodded, looking as if the move was paining him, but Scheet and Leyendecker moved down the bar to us.

LEYENDECKER, who was very smooth and bald with a head that looked like an egg, said: "They took us before a Coroner's jury and

asked us stuff and things and then they let us go. We'll have to repeat our testimony before the Grand Jury—they bound Pete over to it. They'll clear him then, or that's what the lawyer he got told us. Hell! Collins went for the play—Pete had to follow suit."

"Just get in?" I asked.

"Yeah! A State cop brought us back. He said they took us from here so they'd return us."

Schect asked us if we'd have a drink and I pointed down at our bathing suits and said we were going up and change into a suit of sun tan oil to take away the burn, and then put something on the sun tan oil that would cover our nakedness. We discussed sunburn and how bad it could make you feel, and past Schect and Leyendecker I could see Garr and Thomas talking, with Thomas glaring past Garr at us and laying down the law to Garr—or at least that's the way it looked to me.

We begged off the drink, promising to pick it up a little later on and went upstairs, and the first thing that Kenny did, before he even took off his wet bathing suit, was go to the writing desk and start drafting wires. I came out of the bathroom after a shower and he was hard at it.

I said: "And now? Writing your memoirs?"

He said: "I'm wiring the department to make a check and see if there's anything standing out against these guys. My God! I never saw so many hoodlums in one bunch except that time I went through the Federal pokey at Atlanta."

"They're here in bunches."

"And they're here on business," Kenny said darkly. "You can't tell

me so many of 'em are here for fun."

"What about four twelve?"

"I'll get dressed and then we'll take a look," Kenny said indifferently. "If the boy was right, she won't be going away from there until she's carried, will she? We got time."

Just another proof that Kenny had worked homicide for too long a time.

He took his turn at the shower and got dressed in his flashiest rig—white flannel pants and a candy-striped jacket that looked like something that would have gone over well at Hog Wallow High School. The effect wasn't just loud—it was lurid. Kenny is slightly over two hundred pounds of short and heavy man, and this rig was just blasting.

He preened in front of the full length mirror and said: "Boy! Am I katosh?"

I said: "Words fail me. Shall we go?"

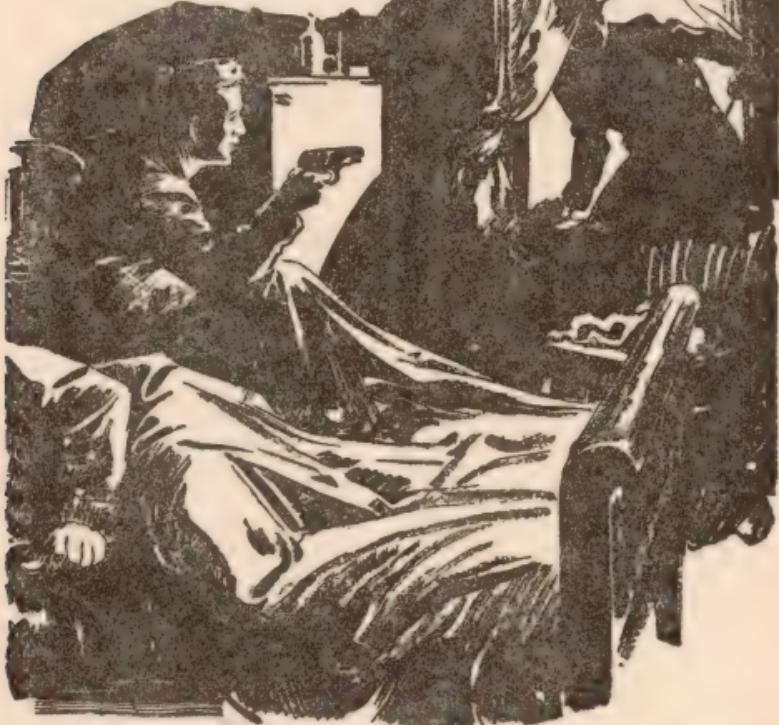
We went, with Kenny peering back over his shoulder at his reflection in the mirror.

MISS FLO turned out to be one of the girls who'd been in the Tap Room with the party Jane Garr had been with. She was one of those Jane had told me "the less said about the better." She was a big blond girl—far *too* big and buxom to be really pretty—and probably thirty-five. She'd have been a swell dish for anybody that liked 'em fat and pudgy—and we got the full benefit of the bulk because she wasn't more than half dressed,

She was in the middle of the floor but it looked as though she'd fallen

from the bed and crawled to where she'd died. There was a bloody smear across the rug marking her path. She'd been beaten a little around the face and there was a big bruise on one shoulder, but she'd been killed with a knife. A knife al-

I lined the gun on his middle, and waited to see what he would do.



ways makes a messy murder, but when the victim is a decidedly over-stuffed gal it's worse—I found it out right there. The blade had caught her just under the ribs on her right side, and it must've been sharp-

edged because there was a slash where it entered that was at least four inches long.

The bed was a bloody mess, and she'd struggled there if the condition of the bedding meant a thing.

There was a stand table by the head of it, and there were two highball glasses there, both empty. The table was upright and the glasses hadn't been disturbed.

I'd heard that death from loss of blood, like from a stab wound, isn't painful, but from the expression on her face that death had hurt Miss Flo a lot. I remembered she'd had a blowsy, raddled complexion, and it had faded so that those broken veins looked blue and patterned under her skin. Her fat legs and middle made her look gross and nasty, and she had none of the dignity of death the papers write about.

Kenny said: "I've seen 'em messy, but this one'll class right up by the top. Look in the bathroom for the other one."

"Miss Betty?"

"That's right. The two of 'em were together when they sent down word they wanted to talk to us, weren't they?"

SHE wasn't in the bathroom or in the closet. When I'd made sure of this I turned back to Kenny and found him staring down at a knife with a broad, curved blade, that was different from anything I'd ever seen. It was new to him, too, from the expression on his face, and from the way he was turning it over and over in his hands.

"That it?" I asked.

"It was under the edge of the bed," he said. "And there were seven of these."

He put the knife carefully back under the bed where he'd found it and hauled seven one thousand dollar bills from his pocket. They were the first I'd ever seen — I'd once

owned a hundred dollar bill and that was a curiosity all the time I had it. For all the three days I had it.

I said: "And where were they?"
"Under the pillow."

One pillow, the one in front, had been wadded and rolled on, but the back one was still in place. He pointed at it and said: "I was just looking around on general principles. And they were there, all seven of the little beauties. A good day's work for us, Gibbie, my boy."

"You going to keep 'em?"

"We're going to keep 'em."

"There's liable to be hell to pay about it, Kenny."

He waved a hand and said: "She can't cry about 'em being gone. Who's going to know?"

I didn't say anything more. After all, he could have been right in that nobody would know about us taking the seven bills. And, after all, it was thirty-five hundred dollars in my pocket. And, also after all, was the fact that both Kenny and I were planning on finding her murderer—though we hadn't come out and put it in so many words.

She was in the position of a client, in that sense, and clients should pay..

I said: "Well, we've looked it over. We'd better get the hell out of here and let somebody find the body."

"That George!"

"George?"

"That colored boy!"

I said: "I thought of everything. I took him to the side and told him to keep his mouth shut. I told him the cops would sure as hell claim he did it, and that he'd be lucky if he wasn't lynched while they were taking him to jail."

"Will it keep him quiet?"

I said: "Listen, Kenny. He *can't* talk. When I left him, he was trying to say 'yes, sir' and all he could do was stutter."

CHAPTER IV

The Tell-Tale Stain



JANE GARR was in the Tap Room with her aunt and I headed for them, with Kenny in tow. There was no sign of Uncle Harry, and I was as well satisfied—that fishy stare of his was getting on my nerves. The juke box was even noisier than usual.

"Harry told us you had no luck," said Mrs. Garr. "That was too bad."

"There's luck and luck," Kenny told her. "Some of it's bad—that's the kind that Gib and I have."

Jane smiled at me, in a secretive sort of way, and I decided that I'd had a lucky break there, at least. Just meeting a girl like that's a break—and she seemed willing to be even friendlier.

We ordered drinks around, with Mrs. Garr holding out for a seltzer lemonade and with Jane going for a Planters Punch, and then I asked Jane to dance with me. Some dope had turned on one of the jitterbug specials, so I took her over to the side where there was a little more room, and we just swayed back and forth in time to the racket.

"Good band," she murmured.

"Sousa had one, too," I said.

"That's twice you mentioned Sousa."

"Well, he had a band—and it's the only band that I can remember."

That seemed to satisfy her and we'd have probably stayed there in that corner—me in the coma I went into every time I put my arm around her—except that I made a mistake and nipped her toe. It isn't hard to do with these open-toed affairs the gals wear nowadays. Anyway, it snapped us out of it.

"My aunt's looking at us," she said.

"No doubt."

"I want to talk to you — your friend interrupted last night."

"He certainly did."

"But I'm afraid to have you come to my room tonight."

"Why?"

"Somebody came in last night, after you were gone."

"Why didn't you scream?"

"I was afraid to scream."

I didn't blame her—screaming, if the burglar was one of that fine collection of yeggs I'd already noticed, would be the same as signing a death warrant for herself.

I said: "You were smart. What happened?"

"The burglar hunted around, then went away."

"What was he hunting for?"

"I don't know."

I REMEMBERED one of the stories about her famous, or infamous, father. It was that he'd always turned his dough into Government bonds, and that he had 'em salted all over the United States.

He was supposed to have had safe deposit boxes in every state in the union, working on the principle that the cops, in case of bad trouble, might find a few of the caches, but that they couldn't find 'em all.

I said: "You all clear on the money angle? You just wouldn't happen to have a flock of negotiable

"Uncle Harry copied them off and gave them to me. He said it was always a good idea to keep a



securities, or anything like that, around, now, would you?"

She said: "I had ten one thousand dollar bills when I came down here. The burglar couldn't have been looking for those—my uncle took them the day after I got here."

"For what?"

"To keep for me. To put them in the safe, where they'd be all right."

"You got the numbers of 'em?"

record of bills as big as that, just in case."

I decided that I'd better tell Kenny not to flash any of the money he'd found under the dead Miss Flo's pillow—that it was not unlikely that Jane's thousand-dollar bills and those he'd found were one and the same. Certainly thousand-dollar bills wouldn't be common, even in a swank resort hotel like that one.

"There was nothing else a burglar could be looking for? I was trying to puzzle things out, without much to go on."

"I don't know what. I brought little jewelry down with me."

I thought of that ruby and emerald dinner ring and mentioned it, and she gave me a little off-hand wave.



"Oh, that!" she said, as if things like that grew on trees.

I decided that Tommy Garr had left her even more money than was popularly supposed.

"I could go to *your* room. That is, after the Tap Room closes. It would be too apparent if I left before. I never do."

I noticed she already had a slight bead on and took it from that that

getting a bit drunk in the evening came under the heading of habit.

"My friend Kenny'd be there," I said. "That's no dice. He'd stay away, but after the Tap Room closes there's no place to go and nothing to do but sit in the lobby or go off to bed."

"There's the beach," she said, thoughtfully.

"There's the beach," I agreed. "And there's the Shore Patrol, walking back and forth and chasing the

citizens inside, where they belong."

"Oh, them!" she said.

"They've got guns. They shoot 'em at people who're out on the beach where they don't belong. Your aunt warned us about it—d'ya remember?"

"I know where the Patrol goes—we don't have to get in their way," she said. "We've got to get back to the table. Auntie's getting worried. I'll meet you just outside the Tap Room, right after it closes. The door on the beach. All right?"

I said I hoped it would be all right and led her back to the table.

MISS BETTY came in not five minutes later, and she saw Kenny and me sitting with Jane and Mrs. Garr and headed directly for our table. She didn't make it. I heard the crash of the shot, from outside the open door leading to the beach, and saw Miss Betty stagger. The gun banged again and she took a couple of little mincing side steps. The gun sounded again, three more times, and Miss Betty went ahead on her face, falling like a rag doll. The last three slugs hadn't been meant for her, or at least they hadn't hit her, because I'd seen her jerk when the first two smacked her—and she'd done nothing like that on the last of the salvo.

Our table was not far from that beach door and both Kenny and I had a clear path to it—but we sat where we were. Neither of us was wearing a gun, and neither of us wanted to run out into the face of one.

And besides that, neither of us knew Miss Betty—other than what Jane had told me and what the col-

ored boy had told both of us. All we knew was that she'd been in the party Jane Garr had been with the first time we'd seen her—and that don't mean the kind of acquaintance that demands a man to run under a gun.

Of course we knew—and as far as we knew the colored boy was the only one who knew it besides us—that her pal, the one called Flo, had been murdered. But we weren't supposed to know it and so we sat where we were and watched what happened.

There were ten waiters and two bar men and at least twenty-five guests around the girl in five seconds. There's always a crowd in a case like that—the damn' fools who rush in where angels and people with brains fear to tread.

Kenny said: "Lord! That was fast!"

And sat where he was.

I said: "The guy that did it can keep in the shadow of the building and blast the pants off anybody running out. I don't care for any."

Jane Garr said: "Oh, poor Betty!"

And Auntie Garr said to Kenny: "Oh, Mr. Hardin! Isn't that blood on the cuff of your coat?"

I DON'T think that Kenny got it for a moment. He kept looking at the crowd gathered around the fallen Betty and started to grumble about people being morbid morons who couldn't resist the chance to see a nice fresh corpse. He didn't put it quite that way but that was the sense of the remarks.

Then it dawned on him. He said: "What's that?"

Mrs. Garr pointed to his Joseph's coat and said: "That! Isn't that blood on the cuff?"

It was, of course. In some way he'd managed to get blood on his coat cuff from the broad-bladed knife that had killed the big blond upstairs. Or maybe he'd dragged it across the bloody bed linen, while abstracting the seven thousand-dollar bills from under the pillow. Any-way, there it was—a broad brown-crusted stain covering the entire inside of that coat cuff.

He said, laughing unconvincingly: "I guess I must've dragged my arm across where somebody spilled a drink."

Jane said: "It's blood."

Mrs. Garr said: "You wouldn't, by any chance, be trying to cover something up, would you, Mr. Hardin?"

I said: "Kenny should have sent that coat to the cleaner's days ago. He wears 'em after he falls down drunk in 'em."

It was feeble, but it was the best I could do on the spur of the moment. The worst of it was the way Jane and her aunt were acting. They were leaning ahead, both staring at that tell-tale stained sleeve.

HARRY GARR saved the day. He'd appeared from nowhere—viewed what was left of Miss Betty, and had taken charge in his impersonal cold-eyed way. He already had the crowd moved back and now he came to our table.

"It would be a favor, Mr. Hardin," he said, "if you'd take over until I can get the officers. I realize you've no authority here, but at least you're an officer. I know, of course,

that the body can't be moved."

Kenny jumped at the diversion like a cat at a mouse. "That's right. She's got to be left like that. She dead?"

"Don't you know?"

"I'd gamble on it," Kenny admitted. "But I didn't look at her. I didn't want to be trampled in the rush—everybody in the joint's taken a look at her."

"She's dead."

"She fell that way."

"Should I close the place? Or should I keep the guests here? Will the police, do you think, want to question the guests together?"

"What d'ya want to do?"

Harry Garr smiled thinly and said: "I'm in business, Mr. Hardin. I knew this woman just to speak to. I see no reason why this corner of the room couldn't be blocked off and something thrown over the poor soul and go on as we were. When the police come, they will undoubtedly appreciate having all the witnesses together."

"Work it that way, then," Kenny told him.

But when we went over to the body and started boxing it off with tables put on their sides, shoving the guests right and left to do it, he told me what he thought.

"I thought I was a tough baby," he said, "but I'm a babe in arms compared to that cold-blooded —. That guy's got snake blood—it's cold. It don't run like a man's—they dig it out of him with a spoon."

I said: "The guy really hits a new low, and that's a fact."

Nobody'd discovered the dead blonde upstairs yet—and they hadn't by the time the bar closed.

And the cops hadn't arrived yet, either. Business had just gone on as usual—with the customers dropping over for a look at the body, which we'd covered with a sheet, and then hurrying back to their tables for a fast drink and to make some smart remark. The pet one was a stinger. It went:

"In the midst of life there's death."

They did everything but drink to the corpse . . . and Garr made a good thing out of selling set-ups.

CHAPTER V

Proposition from the Boys



ANE met me, regardless of the killing in the barroom. That was another thing that should have rung a warning bell — she took the thing right in her stride.

I said: "There's been trouble enough now—I don't want to run into that Shore Patrol."

"Silly! They're not a shore patrol. They're Coast Guard and soldiers who just walk up and down the beach. The Shore Patrol takes care of the men in the towns."

"Why quibble? Where do they go and where do we go?"

"This way," she said, taking me by the arm.

Garr had two big Chesapeake retrievers; big brown dogs that are just about tops for bringing out ducks, and they came bouncing up, prancing around and begging to be taken for a walk.

Jane said: "That's fine. We'll take Bob and Buck. If the Coast Guard comes along, they'll think the dogs are just out playing. They know 'em."

I was thinking less of sauntering along the beach by the minute but I couldn't say no to anybody that looked like Jane. Or who talked or acted like her.

I said: "Oh, sure."

I shouldn't have worried. She took off, keeping well above the shore line, and we went for a quarter of a mile straight down the beach before we stopped. We ended up in a little hollow, well up from the shore, and we couldn't be seen unless somebody got right up on the rim of the hollow. Whoever found us would have to be looking for us, and the Coast Guard had no reason to be doing that.

I said: "This is cozy. Not even mosquitoes."

"The ocean breeze keeps them away," Jane told me. "We'll have to talk low—that's all."

IT WAS an excuse to sit near to her and I took it. I was looking for something like that. I was even praying for it, which will show how bad I had it.

I said: "We can take off where we left off last night. You were telling me your uncle just the same as insisted on your being nice to this fine bunch of hoodlums in his place. Now why?"

"I can't understand it. You see, it's my money that's in the hotel, here. Uncle just leases it from me."

"I see. And you said you were afraid to talk to your uncle—that he's been nuts since he killed his partner."

"I didn't tell you it was his partner that was killed."

"Hardin, my partner, told me that."

"How did he know? It was a long time ago it happened."

"Well, Kenny's been in police business for a long time. And he's half elephant. He's half as big as one and he's got the same kind of memory."

"I see. Uncle *has* been queer since that time."

"They come out of jail that way sometimes."

The dogs had been digging around in the sand for fiddler crabs. One of them was half out of sight and the other was digging down to meet him, or so it looked. It was full moon, with the hollow almost bright enough to read fine print—and we were both just sitting there side by side and watching them. They were the only thing moving—it's automatic to keep your eye on action at a time like that.

We saw what they dug up at the same time. One of them had his teeth in one end of the thing and the other was playing tug of war with him, being fastened on the other end. They were playing mock war—growling deep in their throats at each other and tugging and shaking the thing they held between them.

Jane called softly: "Bob! Buck! Drop it! Drop it, now!"

They were trained and well trained. They dropped what they held and sat beside it, with their tails thumping the sand.

AND Jane and I found the thing was a collapsible rubber boat, neatly stowed away in a nice little rubber bag. We spread it out and found it was about fourteen feet long and half that wide. There was provisions made for bracing it across



As I went out the door, she was still screaming curses at me

and down its length with some kind of supports, but those and the oars were missing. The dogs had dug it up from under about three feet of sand.

I said: "What's all this?"

"It's a boat," said Jane. "You know what it is. What I want to know is what it's doing here and what it's for."

There was enough light for me to see she was frowning.

"It's stuff like this the Coast Guard is looking for," I told her. "Somebody came in on this thing from a submarine. On a dark night it wouldn't be too much of a trick. They've caught 'em doing it both north and south of here—why shouldn't they be trying it in the middle? Figure out another answer."

"It could be smuggling," she said.

"It could be," I agreed.

"What should we do?"

I said: "Get the hell away from here, just as soon as we put this back where we found it. We can figure

what we'll do next, as soon as we're safe."

"Safe?"

I said: "Look, Jane! Maybe you forget. I don't—I'm the kind of guy that scares easy. That girl that was shot tonight came in from outside. She'd been out here, somewhere, and somebody followed her and popped her, still from outside here. The guy's still outside, as far as I know. If you think I'm going to play hide and be shot at out here in these dunes, you're just crazy. You're a swell gal and I'm nuts about you, but I want to live a long, long time."

"It's a speech," she said.

I said: "Come on and help me," and started putting the rubber boat back where it had been. We had to keep shoving the dogs away. They wanted to help—they thought it was a game of get the badger or something.

OLLIE SCHECT and Hermie Leyendecker were waiting with Kenny Hardin, when I got back to the room. Both of them looked sour, and Kenny was wearing the smug look he puts on when things are really rolling to suit him.

"Hah, boy," he said. "We've been waiting. Ah, love! Love's young dream! Love's young ecstasy! And now that we're over with the poetry, did you do any good for yourself?"

I said: "We've got company."

Schect and Leyendecker both grinned weakly and waved the high-ball glasses they were holding in greeting. Neither of them acted as though he was getting any lift out of the drink.

Kenny said: "The boys came in

with a proposition. I vetoed it. I made 'em one and they vetoed that. It's a Mexican stand-off. They're afraid to let go and I won't, now that I know what it's all about."

"What's it about?" I asked, making a drink. I was starting to get a little dizzy. There were too many curves being thrown in the Belhaven Hotel—I had the feeling I was missing every time at bat.

"The boys came down on business. They came down to do a little refined blackmail, along with a little card hustling on the side. And they are afraid to work—they want us to fix it up for them. They got a notion we throw our weight around for free, though."

Leyendecker said: "Now look, Hardin. That's not fair. We haven't made a dime down here. Harry Garr got us down here, and then all hell blows off. Pete Arlen knocks over Jackie Collins and starts it off. Then Betty Arlen gets killed, right there in front of everybody, in the Tap Room. Then Flo Collins is found in her room, just deader than a smelt."

"Didja know there was another woman killed here tonight?" Kenny asked me, drooping the eyelid that was on my side.

"I didn't."

"'s a fact."

"Flo Collins? Jackie Collins' wife?"

"She passed as it," said Schect, in an aggrieved voice. "That is, she passed as it at home. Down here she wasn't even supposed to know Jackie. There's always a chance to pick up a dumb biddie with dough, in a spot like this, and we agreed that we were to go all out on every angle.

She was supposed to be just another guest. So was Betty Arlen. She wasn't supposed to even know Pete, but the two damn' women got together and decided they'd bust in, so's Pete and Jackie wouldn't do any chasing around for fun. Get it now?"

"I'm starting to," I admitted.

"The cops went up to look over Betty's room, when they got here after the Tap Room closed. They walked in and there was Flo, just deader than a smelt. You can see what it's going to do to us. They both got records and so have we. We came down here together and we'll be tied together. It just happens that we've got an alibi for the time Flo was killed—the doc set the time and we were with a State cop then. We were in the bar at the time Betty got her package. So we're clear—but we won't make a dime until this mess is cleared up. The cops won't let us work."

"There's another of you heels," I said. "Where's the other one?"

"You mean Charley? Charley Thomas?"

"That's right."

"Charley's a cop hater," Leyendecker explained calmly. "Both Ollie and I'd rather split with a cop than take nothing. Charley feels different. He'd starve before he'd cut a cop in for a dime."

Kenny said: "He's nothing but a damn' fool. The boys say they'll cut us in on every play but I say no."

I DIDN'T know what Kenny was working for so I let him take the ball. I said: "You're the man! I'll go along with what you say."

"It's just that the boys aren't telling me the truth. They're not down

here for that kind of potatoes. They are perfectly willing to cut us in for the chicken feed but we don't get a cut of the gravy. The boys figure to make us miss the boat on that."

"On what?"

"On what they're down for. They're not down for small stuff."

Leyendecker said: "You're nuts, Hardin. It's a fact. Things haven't been big time for either Ollie or me for a long while. And it's not small time—there's plenty going on in this scatter that'd pay off big."

"Cut us in on something big and we'll go along," Kenny said. "Until then, do the best the State cops will let you do. A dime'll get you a dollar that they float you out of the county and the state inside of twenty-four hours after they find out who you are."

Leyendecker spread his hands out, palms up. "Well, it's there," he said. "Take it or leave it."

He nodded to Schect and stood up. "And Hardin," he said.

Kenny said: "Yeah!"

"While the State cops are chasing us out, we'll probably feel it's our duty, as good citizens to tell 'em about the blood that was on your coat cuff this evening."

"I got that while I was putting the sheet over that poor wench that was shot in the bar," Kenny said.

"That's not the way we heard it," Schect said. "Of course if you and Haley decided to play along with us, we'd probably forget all about it. I never rated on a guy in my life—if the guy was more good to me out of jail."

Kenny said: "Get the hell out before I throw you out. That means both you bums."

Leyendecker said: "We'll see you tomorrow!" and they left under their own power. Kenny might have wanted to throw them out—but he also wasn't the blue-eyed boy that jumped before he knew how deep the water was.

CHAPTER VI

The Ten Bills



ARDIN went to bed and wouldn't talk to me. He said he wanted to figure things out before he went out on a limb and turned his back and started to snore—so I decided he must have been letting his subconscious do the figuring out for him.

As a matter of fact, he was drunker than an Indian. I figured he'd been right — that neither Schect or Leyendecker would be at the Belhaven Hotel for small money and that there wasn't big stuff in either cards or blackmail in that spot.

It had to be something else and I had an idea what it was but wasn't sure. My idea was that Jane Garr was the patsy some way—she had money and lots of it and it was the kind of money that's always causing trouble. It had been hot money in the first place, when Tommy Garr had made it, and that kind of money doesn't cool off.

It was still just a thought, but there was common sense behind it.

And I was in bed, thinking of it, when the burglar broke in.

IN THE first place he was clumsy—he'd have woke me if I'd been sound asleep by the amateur way he

worked. I heard a key snicking around the door with no result and remembered the hotel had its locks set back of the jambs, where a knife blade couldn't reach the bolt. Outside of the regular hotel pass key I knew the lock would hold—they put these hotels up with real hardware most of the time.

By and by the fumbling around the lock stopped and I started watching the windows. The fire escape ran by the one on the right and they were all up for air. I could even hear the iron creak as somebody's weight went full on it, when he went out the exit door at the end of the hall. I even heard him rip some part of his clothes on part of the thing and heard what he said about it.

It was soft but it was still profanity and I tried but couldn't distinguish the voice.

The moon was so bright the window looked like a door into a dimly lit room, and so when the man appeared there he looked as big as a house. Of course his face was toward me and in shadow, but I could see he was as big a man as I am, and that's kicking around the one-eighty mark. He looked twice that big though, in that light, and I lined the gun I'd thoughtfully taken to bed with me on his middle and waited for him to do what I thought he'd do.

I thought it would be somebody who'd seen Jane and me discover the rubber boat, and I thought he was just making up his mind whether to blast Kenny out first or whether it was my number that was up on top. He'd take Kenny right along with me—he couldn't chance my having told what we'd found, or so I thought.



I never thought about it being a burglar at all—that rubber boat was too much on my mind. But the guy didn't even hesitate in the window but came right in, and I let him come.

Kenny had taken off his clothes and, due to early furnished-room training, had draped them carefully over a chair. The guy went through Kenny's pants first, and because he was still outlined against the window, I could see him slip Kenny's wallet out from a hip pocket. Next he went to my clothes, which weren't

So we went up the back stairs like the porter and the chambermaid.

as carefully hung up. He took my wallet, which held little except identification cards because Kenny hadn't cut me in on the seven big bills at that time. He hadn't had a chance to change one of them, so that he could make an even split—or so he said.

The burglar cleaned me and then went back to Kenny's side of the room.

And he got Kenny's candy-striped coat and was going toward the window and making himself into a perfect target for me when Kenny woke.

I WILL say for Kenny, he goes into action with a rush. He always did and I suppose he always will. He came out of sleep and saw a stranger in the room and he was out of bed and on him in that same flash. It was so fast I didn't have time to pull the trigger and down the guy before Kenny got to him. I was out of bed myself by that time and then I made my big mistake. I suppose I'd do it again — the room didn't seem dark to me. Anyway, I didn't turn on the light, but circled Kenny and the burglar, waiting for a chance to crown the guy with my gun barrel.

Kenny had come out of a sound sleep and gone right into heavy action, and because of this he was handicapped. All he saw was blurred, both by the struggle he was putting up, and by his sleepiness. I circled close to them as they rolled on the floor and stumbled against a chair and so didn't get out of their way in time. They rolled against me and either Kenny or the burglar got a hand on my right ankle and yanked.

Down I went into the fracas, making it three of us rolling around there on the floor. I couldn't swing with the gun because Kenny was in and out of the way, bobbing back and forth like a shuttle and smacking me as often as he hit the burglar. The burglar was all out for himself. He couldn't hit a friend and he wasn't pulling his punches—he was laying 'em right in where they

weren't doing me any good, and I don't suppose they were helping Kenny.

Then either Kenny or the burglar connected with me solidly, and the next I knew I was on hands and knees, shaking my head like stupid, with Kenny chortling over both our wallets and his coat.

"Snap out of it, Gib," he said. "I got the stuff. That guy dropped it before he went out the window."

"He get away?"

"He damn' near took me with him. The guy was like a tiger, that's what."

I thought of the perfect chance I'd had to score on the guy's knees and cripple him — and how curiosity about what he was going to do had stopped me. And now all I could do was guess who he was.

"It was bad management on my part," I said. "Could it have been Charley Thomas?"

"It could."

"Was it?"

Kenny stared and said: "How the hell do I know? I grabbed the guy and got hold of a tiger, just like I said. I was too damn' busy to find out who he was."

That was that. We went back to bed, with Kenny rejoicing over still having his coat and the seven thousand-dollar bills.

I wasn't feeling very good.

KENNY'S idea, according to him, was to lead Schect and Leyendecker on and find what they were up to, but knowing Kenny, I didn't think Kenny would turn down a few extra bucks if they came along. Kenny could well be out for a shake-down, and nobody knew it better

than I—and with his jacket showing that blood and with Mrs. Garr seeing it, the shakedown could turn out the other way.

He wouldn't admit he was worried but I thought he was—I couldn't see how he could keep from it.

We picked up Harry Garr's surf rigs and wandered down to the beach, but after a couple of casts just sat on the bank and rested. The fish weren't doing their part, anyway, so we weren't losing anything.

I said: "It's a mess. I'm going to tell Jane to ask her Uncle Harry for those ten bills she gave him to keep for her in the safe. That'll at least tell us whether these we've got are good to spend."

"They're good to spend," said Kenny, grinning widely. "They won't go on record as being stolen all over the United States. And we didn't steal 'em, anyway—we found 'em."

I thought of whether I should tell him of the rubber boat Jane and I had found, and decided against it. I wanted to talk to the Coast Guard about that. The way the thing had been packed looked like it was meant to return to where it had started from—and that would be one of the U-boats raiding the coast.

I said: "Jane's in this, some way. She said all five of those guys—well, there's still four of them left, were against her old man in the old gang days. They're big time—they wouldn't be down here just to chisel in a few poker games. As far as blackmailing goes, they wouldn't have to come down to a little resort hotel to find suckers. All they've got to do is keep their ears open, where they came from."

"I figure that. But what's Jane got that they can't get?"

"Those ten bills."

"That's two small for five hustlers of that class to go all out for. Schect and Leyendecker think I can take the State cops away from them. They think I can give 'em an okay with the State boys, and we both know I can't."

"You could."

"How?"

"If we find who's done all the killing, it would take the trouble away from the hotel."

"We've got a seven thousand-dollar fee," Kenny said thoughtfully. "All we have to do is get busy and earn it."

I HAD an idea right then, but I didn't think it wise to tell Kenny of it. Kenny is a strong believer in direct action, and I didn't think it was time for that as yet.

I said: "Did you happen to think who wasn't in the Tap Room when that girl was shot? Or didn't you look around?"

"That ———, Charley Thomas, wasn't in. I saw that. Both Schect and Leyendecker were there, just as they claimed. That's the first thing I looked for."

He'd missed something I hadn't and that's what I wanted to know. Jane Garr and her aunt strolled down toward us then, and we watched them coming and decided Auntie Garr looked almost as well in a bathing suit as did Jane.

And Jane was perfection herself. She had long legs—I hate a girl with a stumpy build—and the rest of her was in proportion. She looked slim in her clothes, but she was rounded

where she should have been and very nicely.

Auntie was a little heavier but certainly not too much so—and Kenny again wondered how she'd picked Garr for a husband.

"She's a pip," he said. "And that Garr's a human error. His folks should have drowned him when he was a pup."

"Some of that stuff of Garr's must have rubbed off on her," I said. "D'ya forget that she must have told Scheet and Leyendecker about the blood on that fancy jacket of yours? That's where it must've come from—Jane was with me so she wasn't the one that told about it."

Kenny frowned and agreed with me, and then the girls came up. Mrs. Garr gave us that slant-eyed look of hers and said, politely, that she hoped we were getting some fish, and Jane laughed and said that all we'd catch was more sunburn.

Both Kenny and I agreed with that.

CHAPTER VII

A Threat and a Promise



JEN Mrs. Garr opened the ball. She said: "Harry, my husband, and I have been talking it over, gentlemen. He asked me to speak to you. We both think that, well, the hotel and the hotel guests need protection. Would you gentlemen take charge and straighten this out? Our season will be ruined if something's not done."

I thought of how Jane had been trying to get me to work for her, and how up to then she hadn't even told me what she wanted me to do.

From the little she'd had a chance to tell me, I took it she wanted to find out what Uncle Harry Garr was up to, but I still wasn't sure. Certainly I wasn't going to take on any added starters, on top of what we already had to worry about.

"We're on vacation, Mrs. Garr," I said. "Both Mr. Hardin and I agreed, before we came down here, that business was strictly out."

Kenny looked at me as if he thought I was crazy, and, according to his lights, I was. I was doing nothing but turn down money, because the Garris would certainly pay for any investigation. But Jane nodded and smiled at me and I figured I'd done the proper thing.

Mrs. Garr tipped her eyebrows and said: "But I thought . . ."

"Cops are an avaricious bunch, Mrs. Garr, but not just all the time. And besides, it's all so simple. The State boys will catch on—it shouldn't take 'em long."

"I don't believe I understand."

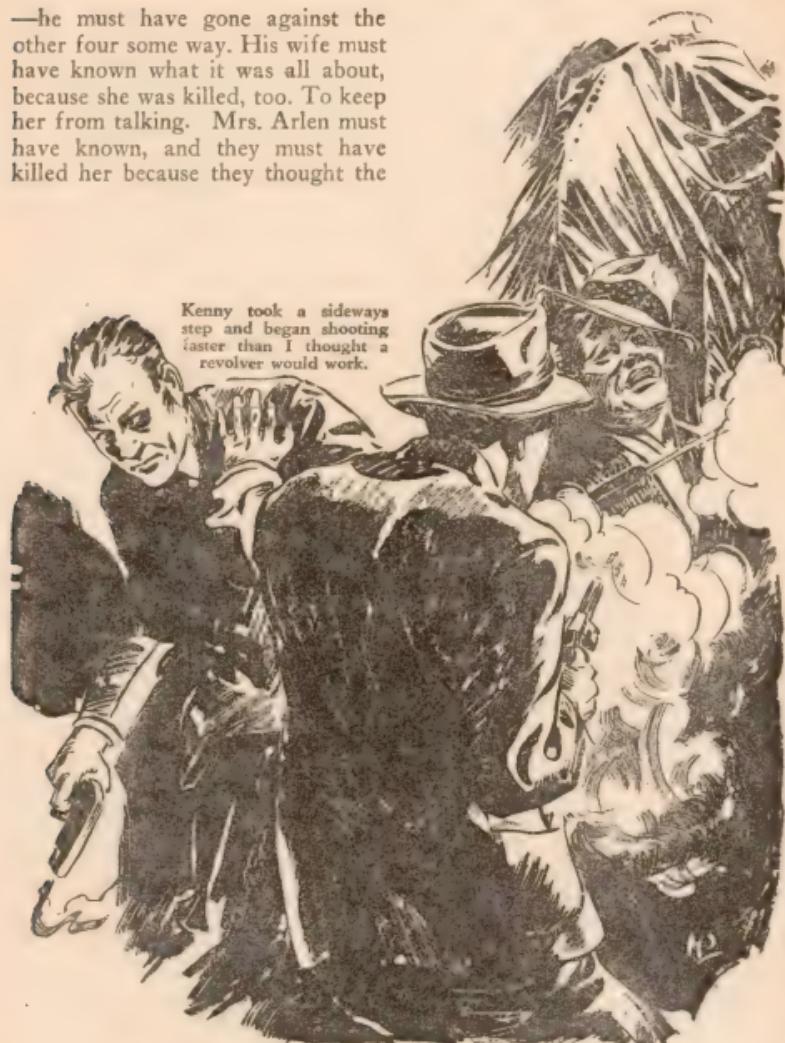
I ticked off names on my fingers. "Charley Thomas. Pete Arlen. Ollie Scheet. Hermie Leyendecker. There was also Jackie Collins, but he's gone. Collins' wife and Arlen's wife are also gone."

"I still don't understand."

She was lying by the clock but I went on, hoping she'd believe I believed what I was telling her. I didn't want her to even think about what was really on my mind.

"The guys are hustlers—used to be called gangsters. Smart hustlers. All of them big time. They play with big money and they got arguing among themselves about some deal. Either a past one or one that was coming up. Collins got killed

—he must have gone against the other four some way. His wife must have known what it was all about, because she was killed, too. To keep her from talking. Mrs. Arlen must have known, and they must have killed her because they thought the



Kenny took a sideways step and began shooting faster than I thought a revolver would work.

cops might break the story out of her. She'd back her husband up, of course, but the other three must've thought she couldn't stand up under a tough police questioning."

Mrs. Garr said, vaguely: "I see." Jane, behind her, nodded and beamed.

"It's a logical explanation and it fits all the facts."

KENNY said: "I do think, Gib, that we could make an exception and look into the thing. After all, we've got the time."

I shook my head and said: "No dice."

Kenny looked unhappy. He said: "Just as you say," as if his heart was breaking.

"We'd certainly appreciate the help," Mrs. Garr said, getting up from the sand. "Come on, Jane. After all, we did come down here to swim. Oh, and Mr. Hardin. The maid took the liberty of putting that jacket you were wearing in the clothes going to the cleaner. Just in case you missed it."

She strolled off toward the water, with an arrogant little swing, and Jane obediently followed after.

And Kenny, with his eyes on that swing, and as if he was being towed by a rope, followed both of them.

He was always quite a ladies' man. I'd have been along for a swim, too—but I wanted to get out of the hotel and to some private phone. I wanted to call the Coast Guard and I didn't want the call to go through the hotel board.

THE Coast Guard Captain was a hard-bitten man of about fifty-five. He pulled his little gray pick-up to a halt beside me, as I trudged down the road, and nodded.

"Haley?" he asked.

"That's right."

"I'm Captain Michaels."

We shook hands and I sat in the car with him and told him what Jane and I had found. I described the little hollow and how to find it with no mistake, and finished with advice I hoped would be taken.

"My idea is for more than just picking up the guys that'll come after the boat. If your boys dug in some place, where they could watch the place with glasses, and see who went there and who with, you could maybe catch the whole bunch and not just the guys going back to make a report. Or to get fresh orders or supplies or whatever they're going back for."

"How d'ya know anybody will come after the boat? Maybe they just buried it so that nobody would find it and turn in an alarm."

"It was packed as though it was going to be used again."

Michaels scowled and said: "They are off the coast, all right. They've put plenty of them down off the coast between here and Hatteras. We can try it, Haley—we've got nothing to lose. And it'll give my boys something to do — it gets tiresome just walking up and down the beach."

"It wouldn't have been tiresome if they'd happened to walk by when the rubber boat was coming in."

"All they need is a dark night and a little luck," he said. "We'll try it your way—I don't need to tell you to keep quiet about it."

"You don't. I haven't even told my partner."

"What about the girl?"

"Your guess is as good as mine. She acted scared, but not scared enough."

"What about these thugs you tell me are staying at the hotel?"

"They could be mixed in it—they'll all do anything for dough."

"It's something else to think about," he said. "Well, we can try it—that's all anybody can do."

He let me out a mile or more

from the hotel and I walked back on the beach. I didn't want anybody thinking I was even interested in the Coast Guard, so there was no sense in driving up to the hotel in a Coast Guard truck.

PETE ARLEN was still in jail and would be held there for a month or more. I heard that from Schect and Leyendecker, who were growling because the Grand Jury didn't meet until that time. To hear 'em talk you'd think the G. J. should have held a special session, just to free their little pal.

Charles Thomas had been with them when I walked in the tap room, but he'd growled a "hello" at me and walked out. I didn't know whether he was a cop hater, like Leyendecker had told me, but he certainly didn't care for me—and he showed it with every move he made.

For a wonder the juke box was silent—the only time I'd been in the place when it was. But a little radio back of the bar was turned on and was doing its best to make up the difference.

Leyendecker asked: "That partner of yours thinking it over? Or won't he take a hint?"

"If you're meaning that business about the jacket, he's not worrying."

"Garr's got it now, Haley—and we're down here on Garr's suggestion. We know that Hardin can clear us—all he's got to do is tell the State cops we're okay. They haven't started to do much checking up yet—he could stop it before it started."

"Nuts."

"He could try. A cop hasn't any more right to knock down seven

grand than anybody else has. Or maybe *that* don't mean anything to you?"

"I don't get it—that's a fact."

"You were with him. Is he holding out on you?"

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about."

"Ask me our room number, why don't you?"

"All right. What's your room number?"

"Four eleven. Right across from four twelve. Last night, after you left us in the bar here, we went upstairs. It just happened our door was opened a little—we could see who went into four twelve. How about it, Haley?"

I said: "You win."

SCHECT was listening, grinning a little bit but not saying a word. He was satisfied to let Leyendecker do the talking, and I'll admit the guy was making a job of it.

"We'll cut you in, just like we said last night."

"You were talking about little stuff last night."

"I still am. I'm just telling you now to lay off us. I'm just pointing out that you and Hardin will be smart to take what you can get and like it."

"Hardin won't like it—I can tell you that."

"He'll take it."

I said: "Well, I'll talk to him."

"And about the seven grand. That will go into the pot, too."

"He won't like that, either."

Leyendecker laughed and turned away. Then he thought of something else and turned back and said: "Something else, Haley. You might

as well know that Charley Thomas isn't in this. He won't play along—Garr and Scheet and I are going to cut him out of it. He's a cop hater and worse than that he's got the cop horrors. He's afraid of them, and that's worse than raising hell with 'em."

"Maybe he's smart."

"What's that mean?"

"Hardin's no chump and he's mean."

Leyendecker laughed again. "He's got blood on his jacket sleeve and he's got three witnesses that saw him sneaking in the room where the girl was found murdered. Of course he didn't do it then—but a good D. A. might convince a jury he'd done it some time before then and was going back to see what he'd missed."

"That sleeve won't count a thing."

Leyendecker just laughed.

And I got another thought and left the hotel and walked up to where I'd found a phone that was private. I'd just thought of another motive for murder . . . one that tied in with rubber boats.

CHAPTER VIII

Another Kind of Money



ARDIN was the one who found them. They were stacked casually back where the hotel kept beach umbrellas and stuff like that. There were four oars—slim and light and particularly well finished, and there were twelve slats, nine of them just the proper length to reach down the length of the rubber boat and the other nine just right to brace across it.

Kenny said: "Well, here the stuff is. But I'm damned if I know what it's for. It's what you're looking for, isn't it, Gib?"

I said: "That's it."

"Why the secret?"

I said: "Because unless something breaks pretty damn' quick, you're going to be in jail, and I don't want you to know anything. What you don't know you can't tell—and I don't want you to get things mixed up more than they are."

I hadn't told him about what Leyendecker had said, but we strolled away from the beach umbrellas and I told him then. And Kenny blew up as I'd known he would. He got red in the face and started walking as though he had a flock of Leyendeckers under his feet. He just stamped.

"Why that egg headed ———!" he said. "Why that half wit ———! Does he think he can get away with anything like that? I'll tear his ears off."

"That won't get your jacket back."

"That damn' jacket."

"Anybody that ever saw it could swear it belonged to you. Once seen, it would never be forgotten."

"Oh damn that jacket."

"What about the seven grand?"

Kenny looked stubborn. "Did you ask the girl what the numbers on them were? Did you ask her to get 'em back from her uncle—that is, if he's still got 'em to give back?"

"No chance yet."

Kenny said: "I can handle Leyendecker and Scheet. I'm not fretting about 'em. It's that Charley Thomas I'm worried about."

"Why?"

"He's an outlaw. And I'm worried about that girl of yours."

"Jane?"

"Jane. Her uncle's no good and her aunt's no good. It stands to reason she's no good, either."

"Now, Kenny."

"I mean it."

I had it bad enough to say: "Lay off Jane, Kenny. I mean it. I'm stuck there."

I left him then and went looking for her, and met her just going into the Tap Room. She started her drinking early—I knew that all I'd have to do was park there and wait for her and that she'd show up.

SHE wasn't alone. She had a nice looking blond kid with her that she introduced as Mr. Smith, and she also had the start of a nice little jag with her. She wasn't tight—she was one of those people who reach a certain stage and stick there. I can't do it—either I'm too sober or too drunk. It's one or the other. Smith smiled pleasantly at me and told me he didn't drink a thing stronger than water, and Jane reached out and tapped him on the back of the hand.

"Now, Smithy," she said. "Not even one little one with me?"

Smith said: "Ugh . . . well . . . ugh . . ."

I waved for the waiter and saw it was the same colored boy who'd found the dead girl upstairs. It was the first time I'd seen him since that time—I figured he'd been hiding in the woods.

I said: "I'll take a plain highball and so will Miss Garr. I don't know what Mr. Smith wants."

Smith nodded that he'd take the same.

"I haven't seen you, George."

The colored boy rolled his eyes. "No, sir!" he said.

We all laughed and he gave me a feeble grin and went away. Smith told me, without being asked, that he was from the city and that he was a medical student. And that he was just down for a little vacation and was going back that same evening.

I said: "Not much of a stay."

He and Jane looked at each other and both said: "Not long enough."

I didn't feel so good about that. It didn't take much if any brains to figure what the score was there. If she hadn't fallen for him, she was falling, and there'd been something wrong with the guy if he didn't do the same for her.

And then she gave me a surprise. Somebody had put a nickel in that damned juke box and she said: "Let's dance, Gib. Smithy doesn't dance."

Smithy nodded pleasantly and said he'd never learned. The guy was getting on my nerves—he was too good natured. Then it came out why Jane wanted to dance with me—I'd walked her around until we were in a corner and she came out with it.

"Do me a favor, will you, Gib?"

I said I'd do anything for her—and like a fool I meant it.

"Just forget what I said about uncle. We had a talk—I was wrong about him. It was just that he'd known this Charley Thomas and wanted me to be nice to him so that Charley would have a good time."

"D'ya believe it?"

"Why, of course."

"Did your uncle meet Thomas in jail?"

She colored and said she believed he had.

I said: "You didn't happen to ask your uncle about whether he's still got that ten grand you left with him for safe keeping, did you?"

HER face just happened to be in the light and I just happened to be looking in her eyes. Well, I won't say it just happened—I spent all the time I was with her doing just that thing. Anyway, I'd swear they lost their soft, half drunken mistiness and hardened.

"I haven't needed it," she said.
"Why do you say that?"

I took a chance and said: "He hasn't got it now."

"Don't be silly. Uncle Harry wouldn't take my money."

I said: "Maybe not. If I was you, I'd be sure."

"I think you're just being silly, Gib."

And then I made another mistake—it was just that I was so stuck for the gal and hated to think of her possibly getting hurt by walking into something. I honestly thought the warning would do no harm—and might keep her from walking around the beach with young Smith. I was afraid she might lead him to the hollow where we'd found the boat—and that wasn't a healthy place right then.

I said: "And Jane, honey. Keep off the beach. I mean it."

"But why?"

"There might be things going on."

I'd said what I wanted to say so I took her back to the table and turned her over to young Smith. And then went up to the room and found Kenny there, and the two of

us proceeded to drink one full quart of whiskey and make a start on another.

Kenny was blue, thinking of maybe having to give back the seven thousand dollars, and I was blue over the way Jane was acting over young Mr. Smith.

AND then the phone rang and, being next to it, I answered it. It was a good thing because Kenny wouldn't have known what it was all about. It was the State Police sergeant I'd called a while before, and he had news.

"You, Haley?" he asked.
"It's me."

"About that guy Collins. Jackie Collins. We checked the family and you were right. He had a brother in the Philippines."

I said: "Thanks, Sarge. That's just what I thought. What about Thomas?"

"No word on that, yet."

"And the others?"

"No word there yet, either."

I said: "Well, I'll tell you now what it'll be. It'll be no."

I hung up and Kenny said curiously: "No what? What the hell's going on? What did you find out then?"

I said: "I found out a motive for one murder—and I know the reason for the other two. Don't get so drunk you can't work."

"I'm not working at anything until I know what it's all about."

"There'll be money in it, Kenny."

He brightened right up . . . but then he faded. Just because I said: "Lots of money—but we won't get a dime of it."

"Why not?" he asked.

I said: "Because it's not that kind of money."

CHAPTER IX

Gun Play



THE Tap Room opened on a screened porch and I sat out there with Kenny that evening while we did our drinking. Kenny was growling because he didn't have his fancy striped coat to wear and was therefore forced to wear a loose tweed effect that was still louder than most brass bands. It covered the gun he wore in a spring holster, though, so I thought it looked just fine.

My own coat was too snug to hide a bulge like my gun makes, so I had the thing stuck down in the waistband of my pants. It's a big gun—a .44 Smith & Wesson Special, and it's not an easy way to carry a gun.

The porch commanded a view of the umbrella storage place, which was why we were sitting there.

The action started just as it got dusky, and I was wrong that time. I didn't think it would be for so soon—but I'd forgotten that the moon would be up by and by and that things would have to happen before there was too much light.

First Uncle Harry Garr ambled into the umbrella place and came out with the oars and the slats. I'd expected that—he could lug stuff like that around a beach hotel with no one thinking a thing about it.

He put the stuff down just outside the place, where anybody could walk by and pick it up.

Jane Garr and her aunt came out then and sat with Kenny and me and

had a drink with us. Kenny was making verbal passes at auntie, with a view toward making them more than verbal, and wonder on wonders—at least to Kenny—he seemed to be getting over with them.

So much so that she finally said: "I feel restless. Let's either dance or take a walk, Mr. Hardin."

That put auntie in the picture, though I'd known she had to be in it. She just about had to be working with Garr.

Jane said: "Aunt's got an idea, Gib. We should do the same. This liquor is starting to take hold. I should walk some of it off, so that I can last out the evening."

I WHISPERED: "We could go to that same place up the beach. I've been thinking—that rubber boat probably was washed up and covered up by sand during some storm that went over the rim of the hollow."

"It's too far," she said.

Kenny didn't know in which direction the danger was, so he and Mrs. Garr went down the beach away from it. She was leading the way, and I figured Kenny was in for an interesting time. She'd have to keep him busy—and busy with Kenny didn't take many different meanings.

I said: "Well, let's take a walk then. Only we'll have to go the other way — your aunt and Kenny have that other location tied up."

I still wasn't sure—or rather I was sure and just wouldn't believe it. But she left me in no doubt. She dropped her voice to a whisper and gave me no chance to make a mistake—either in my suspicion of her or in what was waiting for me.

She said: "I've got a better idea.

Let's go up to my suite. We can go up the back way and nobody'll see us. It's early yet and nobody will think anything about it if I'm not in the bar for an hour or more yet."

I didn't answer for a moment. I was watching Schect and Leyendercker casually pick up the oars and slats that Garr had laid out for them, and as casually stroll up the beach, toward the hollow, where the rubber boat was.

I still didn't know where Charley Thomas was and I tried to find that out without giving the show away.

"I'm a little afraid to," I said. "There's Charley Thomas and there's your new boy friend."

"They're going swimming," she said, and laughed as if at something funny. "They got daring each other about it. I said something about it not being safe out on the beach, because of the Coast Guard and the soldiers, and they both got mad about it. Or at each other. They're just going to wait until it's darker."

I WATCHED Schect and Leyendercker, lugging their bundle away in the dim light. And I could see they kept well above the beach itself—up where the Coast Guard on a regular patrol would miss them.

"What about your uncle? Isn't he likely to come storming in?"

"Uncle Harry wouldn't come in without knocking. You'd have time to—well, you could go in the bathroom or the closet or some place."

"Or hide under the bed."

She laughed and said: "Any port in a storm. Shall we go—or don't you want to? I—from what you've been saying I—well, I certainly don't want to have to coax you."

I thought fast and made myself believe that I'd have an hour or more before anything could possibly happen. That is, before anything could happen down the beach. I figured it would be my own fault if nothing happened to me. I knew better, in my own heart—but even knowing what I did I was still stuck.

Not in the same way though and that was funny. I'd been torching before but then I was half mad along with it. It's tough enough to be played for a fool at any time, but when you're played for a chump by somebody you're nuts about, it's ten times worse.

I said: "Let's go. Up the back stairs, like the porter and the chambermaid.

She led the way toward the back stairs—and that's the last time that was wasted until the shooting started a half hour later.

IT WAS up the beach toward the hollow and it started with the sharp smacking report of a service Springfield. You can't confuse a rifle shot with that of a pistol, and one of those .30-06's makes a noise all its own.

Next there were half a dozen pistol shots, rolling together. There were two guns in this—one of them heavy and the other sharper and with more spite in it. I was already halfway to the door by that time, but I tabbed them as a .45 and a .38.

I also figured the first rifle shot had been a warning that hadn't taken.

Then the rifle opened up again, and with company.

By that time I was on my way out when Jane grabbed my arm. And

by that time I was despising both her and myself.

"What is it?" she asked.

"You bum!" I said. "You know damn' well what it is. And I'll give you a tip. Don't try to get away. You'll stand Federal trial with the rest of them that don't get shot."

I went out the door with her screaming curses after me.

The moon was just coming up but it was still too low to give a great deal of light. I saw Kenny Hardin running up the beach toward me and also toward the hollow, and then I heard the two hand guns up there break out again with a burst of half a dozen shots again. They sounded nearer, and so did the rifles that answered.

I was still in the shadow of the building when Harry Garr went into action and it was that and the shadow and the fact that I'd just started to run that saved me. A shotgun blasted out at me from the side and I felt something slap me on the side of the leg, and I shot three times into the place back of where the orange flame had blossomed at me. I saw Kenny swerve in his running and head directly toward me, with his gun up and ready in his hand, and I shouted before he cut loose at the dim figure I must have showed him.

"It's me, Kenny!"

"You hit," he shouted, and kept coming.

I said: "Yeah!" and fired three times more toward the thrashing sound that started up back of where the shotgun flare had come from, and the thrashing noise stopped right then.

Kenny panted up and I said: "I

got either Garr or Thomas. The Coast Guard's fighting it out with the others, up the beach."

THEN a quiet voice said, from behind me, "You got Garr, shamus. Here's Thomas."

Kenny was facing me and the voice, and he took a step to the side and began shooting faster than I thought a revolver would work. He ripped out six shots so fast that it sounded like a drum beat. I latched out the cylinder of my gun and began stuffing fresh shells in, and I was so scared that I was fumbling them all over the cylinder instead of into the chambers where they belonged.

Then Leyendecker came running toward us, bent almost double, but still trying to look back over his shoulder. He was hunting for his hole in the hotel, like a fox goes toward its den. Kenny hadn't had time to reload, and that made it fine for me, because I never had liked Leyendecker or anything about the oily heel.

"Hold it," I said.

He shot at me and I heard the slug thud into Kenny and heard his startled grunt. I shot back, and Leyendecker slid to a stop, and on my second try he just sat down. He didn't stay that way long, but wilted over to the side as if he was tired.

Two more rifle shots banged out nearer us, and I said: "That'll be Schect. What did you do with the woman?"

Mrs. Garr answered that herself. We heard a muffled booming sound down the beach away from the rifle fire, but it didn't sound like a shot and we just passed it in the excitement.

Then Michaels and five young Coast Guard boys came panting up, dragging Schect between them. He had been shot through both legs and one shoulder. He was conscious, but barely so.

Michaels said: "We got another one up at that hollow. Dressed in bathing trunks. A young, blond guy. My God! The way these boys of mine shoot. So help me, I could do more damage with a slingshot and a handful of rocks. You get the guy that run in here."

I pointed out to where Leyendecker was huddled and said: "There's one. There's another over there—that'll be Garr. He took a blast at me with a shotgun."

And Kenny said: "And Thomas is just inside the door, back of us. *I* got him."

Michaels said: "That'll be all of them then, except the women. That right, Haley?"

I said: "That's right," and decided to sit down. I'd got the outside of the shotgun pattern in my thigh, and it was really bothering. "That's right. One of 'em's down the beach and the other's upstairs."

And then I passed out colder than a wedge.

CHAPTER X

Money Hungry



HEY found Mrs. Garr just where Kenny had left her. She'd taken the muzzle of a little gun between her teeth and pulled the trigger, and it had almost blown the back of her head away. The gun happened to be one of those nasty little old-fashioned

.41 Derringers, and they shoot a wicked big bullet.

Jane Garr had been hiding in a broom closet—why, I don't know. She should have known she couldn't get away. They took her away, charging her with harboring an enemy agent, and she's due for trial with a batch of others they've caught in other parts of the country.

She'll do time on it, for sure—but it won't be too much time. A girl as pretty as that can get away with murder—and she hadn't quite done that.

It was simple and had been from the first. Garr had been hiding enemy agents that came in from submarines. He had an ideal set-up for it—his hotel was on that deserted coast and standing alone by itself—and it was a swanky place that wouldn't be suspected as a hiding place for vermin like that. That's why his wife had married him—she was one herself. She'd been planted in the country before the war—and she recognized the ideal set-up he had and got it solidly by marrying him.

Thomas, Arlen, Collins, and Schect and Leyendecker had either been recruited or were working espionage themselves. Schect and Leyendecker were German and Arlen was Italian, and they were enemy agents in their own right. Thomas and Collins were recruits and Collins had backed up when he found what he was supposed to be helping. He liked money but not that much—his brother had died in the Philippines and he'd thought a lot of the brother.

So they killed him to keep it quiet and rigged his death to look like a justifiable self-defense job.

That was Garr's idea. He'd killed his former partner in the same cute way. He'd also tried to gyp his niece out of her ten grand, and she'd scared him into line by pretending to hire me to work for her. She never had told me just what she wanted me to do and she never intended to tell me. I was just something to scare uncle with.

The two girls, Flo and Betty, had caught wise, and Garr had pretended to pay Flo off. He'd paid her all right, and gone back later and killed her. Betty had found out that he did it, just how, we'll never know, and she'd met him outside with the idea of making a deal with him to keep quiet about that, too.

He'd just followed her to the door of the Tap Room and shot her when she was inside and in the light.

SMITH, the young blond man, was the guy that was going back to the submarine that night. He'd come ashore a couple weeks before then, and had wandered around getting news of boat sailings and stuff like that. The reason they were all out and around that night was the rubber boat—it takes more than one man to launch a clumsy thing like that through surf.

Kenny said it all, while he was sitting on the bed after they'd picked shot out of my haunch for what seemed like too long a time.

"The funny thing is, Gib, that poor Garr was in the middle. He'd had to use Jane's ten grand to pay Flo and Betty to keep quiet. He couldn't give it back to Jane because he didn't have it. He didn't have time to find it when he killed her—he must've still been in the room

when George went up to tell her we weren't going to take up her invitation to call, and scammed out as soon as George left.

"That was funny, too," I said. "Asking us to go up and see 'em like that."

"Funny hell! That was the scare stuff again. They told Garr they'd tell us all about it unless he kicked through. We were used as the big stick, all the way through. Jane Garr used you, and both this Flo and Betty used us."

"The game was big enough for them all to cut in," I said. "Those guys come off those submarines with money in bales. They get all they need for everything—if Garr hadn't been so hungry, he could have played it along and got rich."

"They're all money hungry," said Kenny. "All people like that. I'm glad I'm not that way."

"Certainly," I said. "And while we're talking about money, there's still that seven thousand dollars to cut up. I want my half."

Kenny looked reproachful. "Why, Gib!" he said. "You wouldn't take that kind of money, would you? German money—spy money!"

"It's not German money or spy money now," I said. "It's our money and we earned it. Didn't we bust the thing? Didn't we find who killed our client, even if the client was dead when she hired us?"

"I was afraid you'd feel like that," sighed Kenny. "Well, as soon as I get one of them broken, so we can split even."

I'd already decided that I'd send Jane Garr flowers, just when they were taking her away to serve her

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HARD TO POISON

Karen was stubborn, and Karen was contrary, and Karen's wealth was matched only by her good looks. Where any of these things might have daunted a lesser guy, Hard Guy Duane figured he could cope with them. And whether Karen liked it or not, he set himself to get her out of the jam she was in!



WAS making a blind stab when I stopped to look along the creekbank tangle of brush and vines for signs of stolen cars, so I wasn't surprised when I didn't see anything. The surprise came when I started to drive on, and a girl poked her coppery top and pretty face through a cluster of leaves and called, "Hey, wait!"

I waited quick, wondering what she was doing in the tall uncut beyond the Goldflow oil field, while she eyed me like she was trying me on for size and didn't much like the fit.

"Are you going to Goldflow?" she finally asked.

By JAMES A. LAWSON

I felt like a waltzing mouse on a merry-go-round while everything happened at once.



"You bet." I found my tongue.
"Come on, climb in."

She hesitated, then said, "I'll have to have a coat, or something to put around me, first. I've hardly any clothes on."

FOllowing oil booms as a private dick and trouble-shooter, I've been called everything but too slow on the trigger. Now, I yanked the trigger on my thinker plenty fast.

"No duds?" I yelped. "Get out of that poison ivy, quick!"

She gasped and jumped into the open. Blow up my boiler, she sure hadn't lied about her lack of clothes! The penny-haired honey had on high-heeled slippers, silk stockings, and underthings like you see in the

advertisements in the classy women's magazines.

She stopped, a deep blush darkening her throat and face as she crouched like September Morn and looked up at me. I choked on the unpeeled pineapple that seemed to've stuck in my throat, then opened the door and out of my jalopy.

"N-no," the girl quavered, and got set to hightail. I didn't want this vision to vanish, so I reached back into my heap, got my coat, and tossed it to her. She caught it, put it on, and as she rolled the sleeves up above her hands, she looked toward the creek.

"Why, you—! There's no poison ivy there!" She glared at me.

"You ought to be glad I was wrong," I hedged. "Get in."

"Not until I'm sure *you* aren't poison ivy!" she snapped. "Who are you? What are you doing here at this time?"

My coat came only a little below her hips, and I was staring at her lovely legs just then. I raised my sights and croaked, "I'm Dallas Duane—Hard Guy. There's been lots of cars swiped around the oil-field, driven out and stripped, then abandoned, and insurance companies pay rewards for what's left of them. I've been hunting heaps, and that's how I happen to be here right now."

"Hard Guy?" She made a thoughtful face. "Why, I've heard of you, and if you want a job, I've one for you right away."

"I'm hired. What's the job, and who am I working for?"

"First," she warned, "stop ogling me, and don't get funny ideas. I'm Karen King, and the job's to catch a kidnaper."

Maybe I came up smelling like a rose? Here I was, hunting stolen, stripped cars, and find a stolen, nearly-stripped *heiress* instead! Karen King was the granddaughter of old Wildcat King, who'd recently skidded his mortal rig off this earthly location, leaving her oil stocks, leases, and a sockful of cash, I'd heard. But, cash or not, her warning gripped me, and I used it as excuse to hide how I ached to inherit her—even if she hadn't had a cent.

"Just because you're Karen King, ain't no sign I'd want to get funny with you," I grunted sourly. "And speaking of funny, I guess you better tell me what, besides your clothes, comes off."

"Why, you—! You're insulting! You're fired!" she stormed.

"Give me my coat, then, and I'll cop a mope," I answered.

"You're not only a rude trickster, you're also contrary!" She stamped one foot. "You know you're not really fired."

"No?" I held back a grin. "Answer my question, then."

"My servant was off last night," she said peeviously. "I was alone. I answered my doorbell, and two masked men threw a blanket over me, put me in a car and took me to an abandoned cabin back down this creek. They took my clothes so I'd not try to escape, I guess. A while ago, I heard one drive off, and saw the other man sitting under a tree close to the cabin door. He went to sleep, I slipped out, and got this far when I heard your car . . . Do we stand here talking until the guard finds me gone and gets away?"

Deciding more questions could wait, I started down the creek,

growling, "No, I don't. But you stay here until I get back."

"I won't," she bluntly refused, falling in behind me.

And she'd called me contrary!

WE CAME to a bend in the creek, and Karen poked me in the back, whispering, "The cabin's just beyond those wild plum bushes."

It was a windowless shack, the cottonwood tree under which the guard had gone to sleep barely five yards from the door. He wasn't under it now, though, and I got the feeling that tells a guy there's nobody around. Taking no chances, I reached for my gun before going on, and just then a rasping "*chirr-chirr-chirr!*" of a cicada filed into the silence.

"Ruh-rattle snake!" Karen screamed, and made a flying leap.

The coat opened as she threw her arms around my neck and it wasn't to push her away that I slid my arms around her bare waist! Sweat popped out on me as she trembled against me. The trouble was, I didn't sweat long enough. She drew a long breath, put her feet on the ground and said, "I'm nervous. I know it was a cicada. Let me go."

Karen looked up. *Plock!* I smacked my lips down on hers and hung on like an octopus. She struggled a moment, then put her arms around my neck again, making a low, suffering sound as she kissed me back savagely. Then she shuddered and went limp in my arms.

"Karen!" I sounded like I'd swallowed a steam caliope.

"Poison ivy!" she spat, and slapped me damned hard.

The little minx, I should've kept

working on her contrary side, so I hooted, "That kiss wasn't worth even half a slap!"

"Why, you—" she began furiously as I went on to the cabin.

It was empty. I found butts of a strong, cheap off-brand of smokes under the tree, then traced dim tracks in the sandy ground beyond a thicket. I found Karen's dress where it had been thrown away, and sign showing that the guy who'd driven off hadn't gone far, but had waited and picked up the other mug after Karen escaped.

Escaped? I smelled fish in this set-up, and tried to figure it as I went back to the cabin, where Karen greeted me, "Well, my gallant Hawkshaw— My dress!" She made a grab at it.

"Not until you act reasonable." I held it out of her reach.

"Why, you— Give me my dress!" she yapped. "You're fi—"

"I ain't fired." I threw the dress at her. "I quit!"

I walked away. Karen put her dress on and caught up with me as I reached my car. We didn't speak until I hit the Goldflow road, and then she said, "Don't quit. I may need a bodyguard."

"Yeah?" I growled. "I may take the job—maybe. Now, how much did those skunks want from you? Did you sign a ransom note?"

"No. And they didn't want money. Gramp left me five thousand shares of one wildcat oil company, and they tried to make me sign a transfer and ge: them the old certificate to de-stroy, and warned me not to buy more. I've been advised by Sam Buley—he used to be with Gramp, but isn't working for the trust com-

pany now operating my holdings—to buy all I could, but I didn't. Now, I'm going to!"

"This looks like somebody's trying to grab control," I said. "What oil company is it, and what's the stock worth now?"

"It's Dreeker Exploration, and it sold for a dollar, par."

"Whaaat? Buley advised you to buy that?" I nearly hit a truck. "I know about that wildcat, and Dry-hole Dreeker's rep for sinking dusters for sucker money. That stock ain't worth a cent."

"Gramp was no sucker," Karen retorted, "and this kidnaping assures me that Sam is right, and told the truth. Keep it secret: Sam learned that Dreeker hit big producer sign, paid his drilling crew for secrecy, then shut down the well as a dry hole. He means to buy back most of the stock for a song, then drill on into pay."

"You sure take this Buley a lot on trust," I snorted.

"I do," Karen informed me coldly. "It was Sam found the stock in a secret file after Gramp died. He gave it to me, when he could have kept it. So I'll thank you to say nothing more about Sam."

I WENT into my shell and stayed until we drove through the boil of dust, stink, and noise of Goldflow and stopped in front of Karen's home. Wildcat King had foreseen a future for Goldflow, and built a house on an oak-covered knoll in what was now becoming the "better part" of town. Karen got out and I followed her.

As we entered the big living room, a lanky, spade-completed gal

rushed in, bawling, "Miss Ka'n, I been worrit 'bout you since I come home this mawnin' and seed yo' bed ain't slept in. Honey, is—"

"Everything's all right, Violinda." Karen smiled. "This is Hard Guy. He may become my bodyguard, so stop your worrying."

"Bodygahd? Worry?" Violinda sniffed. "It's 'at triflin'—I means it's Mist' Buley, callin' up heah all mawnin', worrit me!"

The phone rang and Karen went to answer it. As she closed the hall door after her, she said, "Give Hard Guy a drink."

Violinda "gave me a drink" by waving toward a cellarett, inviting me to "Please to dibble yo' snoot, Mist' Hahd Pusson."

"Violinda, you don't like Buley. Why?" I poured some rye.

"'At white trash is cocked dice, 'at's why. He try marryin' Miss Ka'n, she tu'n him down, an' still he pester 'round an'—"

Violinda shut up and hustled away as Karen came back in.

"It was Sam Buley," she told me. "He's coming right up."

He arrived shortly. I disliked the shifty-eyed, tall, pale cuss pronto, and when Karen introduced us, Buley gave a start and demanded to know, "What's this trouble-shooter doing here?"

Karen looked annoyed, but told how come, not mentioning losing her dress. I watched Buley's face, and it looked too blank.

"The devils!" he squawked when Karen finished. "But it was very conniving—convenient, I mean, that Hard Guy was right there."

"If you mean that Hard Guy framed that, so he could help me and



"Rattlesnake!" she screamed, and threw both arms around my neck.

get a job with me, you're crazy!" Karen turned on Buley.

"Got a job with you?" Buley croaked. "Why you need him?"

"As a bodyguard, and to check Dreeker on the kidnaping while I'm buying Dreeker Exploration stock as fast as I possibly can."

"Buy— That's swell!" Buley exclaimed. "But having a dick on the job is a waste of money. I doubt he'll get anything out of Dreeker, unless it's trouble, and you won't need a bodyguard. I—"

"That's my business," Karen cut him off. "Yours, if you want the job, is to chase down people who bought that stock, and get it."

"I'll help, but you should have Sheba Strang buy for you," Buley said. "She sold a lot of that stock and will know where to buy it back. . . . Okay? . . . Then I'll phone her to come up here now."

A tease-built blond who used her charms in selling often-shady oil stocks, Sheba Strang came up pronto. She gave me a thin look when I was introduced, but didn't seem surprised

at Karen's intent to buy stock in a dry hole.

"I won't ask what, but play on a presumably worthless stock means something's up," Sheba said. "One man wanted me to buy for him, paying up to a quarter a share. I suspected he was fronting for Dreeker, and refused. I nearly got into hot water selling the Dreeker Exploration to the public to begin with, and that crooked Dreeker still owes me commissions he won't pay. So if you mean to wreck some scheme he's hatching, I'll be your broker."

"Good. Buy as cheaply and as fast as you can," Karen said.

Sheba moped, and Buley started to leave. He mean-eyed me and said, "Karen, lock your stock up, keep Violinda here nights, and don't be surprised if word you're buying this stock gets around."

"Pile it on," I jeered, "and it'll finally fall over on you!"

He slammed out. I turned to Karen, advising, "Don't pay out a penny until I investigate. I smell a frame-up in this business."

"I need no financial adviser," she informed me stubbornly.

"No," I bit back. "You need a keeper, and I'll prove it."

"Keeper?" she echoed as I hurried out. "Why, you—"



OWNTOWN. I found Specs Norton in a bootlegging joint. He was staring sadly through his horn-rimmed specs into an empty glass. A free-lance news correspondent, Specs has helped me, heckled me, and mooched drinks off me in more booms than I want to remember.

"Hi. Any luck?" Specs coughed dryly and thumped his glass.

"Maybe. But not with stolen cars, you moocher," I growled.

I called for corn juice, then leaned on the plank bar and said, "Give brief what you know about this last Dreeker duster."

"That? The usual moth-eaten deal: Dreeker sold stock to the tune of about eighty grand, used about fifty of it for operating, and the rest was dry hole profit . . . Why're you interested in it?"

When I told him, he swore, "Hell! Can't you see what's up? Sheba, Dreeker, and Buley have framed this to grab a hunk of the coin Karen King inherited. Buley spins that yarn, but she doesn't buy the worthless, already - once - sold stock he advises. So, they snatch her, warn her *not* to buy it, then let her escape. Then, as they figured, her contrariness starts her grabbing up the stuff."

Specs took a drink. "There's one thing, though," he went on, "I don't savvy: That's Wildcat buying those five-thousand shares."

"I mean to check that while I'm trying to get enough proof to convince Karen she's being bilked," I told him. "I got to work fast, and need some help."

"Okay." Specs nodded. "But I'm a sucker—so are you! —for getting messed in a deal to keep that mule-headed heiress from getting skinned. I had one sample of her. When Wildcat died, I dubbed her the Old Princess and wrote reams about her. When I tried to get a few personal items, she kicked my shins!"

"She won't kick mine," I told him. "I got technique."

"You got trouble! That's all your technique'll get you with that cussed dame, and I'll bet my hat against a drink on it."

"It's a bet," I accepted. "And talking trouble—" I nodded toward three men who came in from the cigar store up in the front.

DRYHOLE DREEKER—a skull-faced crook I knew only by sight and rep—was arguing with a man dressed in khaki field clothes. "The broken-nosed big devils," Specs said, speaking of the third guy out of the corner of his mouth, "is Butch Flack, an ex-con and a killer. He's Dreeker's bad man Friday."

"I can't be bothered now," Dreeker was yapping as they came up to the bar. "I'll pay you when I get damn' good and ready to!"

"Bigod, I want what I got comin'!" the man in khaki swore.

"You'll git what's comin'!" Flack made a pass at his left armpit and shoved the guy. The guy turned pale as he stumbled back against me, then hurried down to the other end.

"Look who you shove guys into, bum!" I snarled at Flack.

"Hold on." Dreeker pushed Flack aside as he got set to take a poke at me. "Have a drink on me, friend, and forget it. Huh?"

"I don't want a drink, Dreeker." I refused.

"You know me?" Dreeker said. "I don't believe I've had the pleasure of knowing you."

"The handle's Hard Guy," I told him. "I've got a hunch you will get to know me better—and it won't be a pleasure, either!"

"Hell, it's that stinkin' dick!" Flack exclaimed.

"Shut up!" Dreeker elbowed him in the ribs.

"You've already been told about me, huh?" I jeered.

"I don't know what you mean," Dreeker growled. "And I don't know why I should get to know you any better, either."

I didn't explain, because I was watching Flack take a strong, cheap off-brand of cigarette from a pack he'd hauled out.

"Next time you pull a snatch," I told Dreeker, "you better see that your ape don't leave his snipes scattered around. *Sabe?*"

Leaving that for Dreeker to chew on, I walked away along the bar, stopping beside the guy Flack shoved. He looked at me and nodded, then said, "You got trouble with that skunk, too, huh?"

"Yeah. What'd he do to you?" I asked with idle interest.

"I'm Ed Redd. I own a li'l truck outfit. Dreeker's well was too far out to get gas, an' I hauled the crude oil he burned in his boiler. Now, the deggin' son won't pay me!" Redd cussed.

Glancing up, I saw Dreeker and Flack leave. "Too bad, Redd. Glad I met you, though." I said, and went back up to join Specs.

"Dreeker tried to pump me. I said I didn't know you very well," Specs said. "You got Dreeker puzzled, but I can't see that it did any good—mentioning the snatch, then walking off like it never made a damn to you."

"It didn't do any good, and I don't give a damn," I said. "I got enough to do if I get proof to convince Karen she's being framed, and got to get going. I want you to find

some Dreeker stockholders and talk to them, while I check another angle."

AFTER I told Specs what I wanted, and got him going, I went over to the new, four-story brick "skyscraper" where Sheba Strang had her office. She was on the phone when I walked in, and the way she said, "I'll call back," and hung up, gave me an idea the call concerned me, and might have been Dreeker on the line.

"Hello, Hard Guy." Sheba gave me a funny look and a phony smile. "Sit down and get a load off your feet onto your seat."

She leaned back in her chair and crossed her legs as I took a chair facing her. Her short skirt pulled up, and I stared at the tops of her long silk stockings.

"Not bad," I said. "Samples?"

"Not today. Could I interest you in anything else?"

"Dreeker Exploration stock, maybe," I answered, "if you'll give me time to check on it before you peddle it all to Karen."

Sheba uncrossed her legs and leaned toward me. "Buley says you're *supposed* to be a bodyguard. What're you trying to pull?"

"Nothing." I shrugged. "And if you don't want to maybe sell me any stock, later, would you show me the records of who bought it—locally—so I can look them up and maybe make my own deals?"

For just an instant, Sheba's eyes flicked toward a steel filing cabinet in a corner, then narrowed on me, and I knew my try to check Wildcat King's stock certificate had gone 'damn' wide.

"See Dreeker about that," Sheba said flatly. "I wouldn't be having any Dreeker Exploration records, only on stock I sold."

I knew damn' well she'd sold most of it and that, on such a deal, with Postal Inspectors apt to be checking up, Dreeker wouldn't keep his records around himself. I sighed and got up.

"Better go slow on delivering that stock, anyhow," I said.

"Bushwah! You're trying to stall," Sheba said scornfully. "Look. I don't know what's back of this stock movement," she lied. "I sell on commissions. If Karen King wants to buy, I sell!"

I went out and, to make sure of facts, hunted up an oil scout I knew and checked the dope and figures he'd gotten when Dreeker's dryhole was being drilled. Then I went back to the bootlegger's. Specs, a sour look on his pan, was there when I walked in.

"I found two poor old devils who spent their savings for five hundred shares of that stock," Specs growled. "About a week ago, Sheba came to them and said Dreeker meant to pay back all the stockholders in that duster. The old fellows turned their stock in for five cents on the dollar, and a promise of more to come!"

"That's more than they'd got back if those crooked crumbs hadn't wanted that paper to sucker Karen with," I muttered. "I imagine they'll have collected a bale of it like that."

"I bet it takes more proof than the word of two old men, to keep that hard-headed Karen from buying the bale!" Specs snorted.

"I'll get it," I vowed, "and see you around here later."

IT WAS dark out now, and dark in Sheba's office when I got in through the transom a little later. Some light came up from the street, though, and I could see to go through Sheba's file cabinet and find the register of Drecker Exploration stock. I'd cut out the pages I wanted and put the ledger back, when footsteps

With her throat between my mitts, I managed to shut off her cry.



tapped in the hall, stopped just outside, and a key clicked in the lock.

I was behind the door when it was pushed open, and then, as Sheba closed it, I lunged, crooked one arm around her neck and yanked her to the deep dark on the floor so she couldn't see my face.

I'll take nitroglycerin, instead!



She went down hitting and kicking and clawing, and kept at it as we rolled on the floor. She gave a flip and got her neck out of the crook of my arm. I grabbed a handful of her dress as she tried to roll away, and it ripped to her waist as I jerked her back.

"Hehhpp!" she wheezed.
"Hehh—"

I got her throat between my mitts and shut off her cry as I tried to fend her claws off with my elbows. I flopped her onto her back and tried to get astraddle of her. Sheba's tight skirt went the way of the upper part

of her dress as she kicked out, then got her knees up between us. I got two kicks in the cly-bay before I managed to get a wad of Sheba's dress in her mouth. I got her wrists tied with other strips, then turned to tie her ankles. Quick as a flash, she rolled, surged to her feet and began kicking the door. I grabbed and caught her, finished the tying job, then beat it, sorry I couldn't stay a while.

I got my heap and drove to Karen's house, then. Violinda answered my ring, peered through the glass to see who it was, then opened the door. She said Karen was in the living room.

When I went in, Karen laid down a book she'd been reading, and lit into me before I could speak. "If it wasn't that Buley wanted you fired, I would!" she snapped. "Meddler, why did you tell Sheba Strang to go slow delivering that stock to me?"

"Never mind, brat!" I did a quick blister. "Get that stock your grandfather left, and I'll prove to you that I was right."

"Why, you— What do you mean you'll prove you were right?"

"That you need a keeper," I barked. "Go get that stock!"

Maybe I scared her. Anyhow, after hesitating a second, she left the room. I got out the pages I'd cut from the ledger, and was checking them when Karen came back with a gaudy stock certificate. I snatched it and looked at the number printed on it.

"All right," I grunted. "Look here: These are pages out of Dreeker's sucker register. The last stock they sold was to some poor sap in Iowa, and the certificate's numbered

5,304. The number on this certificate for five thousand shares, is 5,305! In other words, your grandfather didn't buy it! They made this certificate out, and Buley brought it to you with that song and dance, figuring it'd start you buying more. When you didn't, they snatched you and worked on your contrary streak."

Karen put one hand over her breast and sat down. I told her of the two old men, and how Sheba had dragged that bum paper in.

"Why would they bother," Karen mumbled, "to do that, if all they had to do was issue me more stock certificates?"

"They could go to the pen for issuing additional new stock in an already-finished bum deal; but there's no law against Sheba getting shares from original holders and peddling them to you. And after they skinned you, they could safely laugh in your face."

KAREN sat stiffly, bit her lips, and her big eyes got all puddled up! I blinked, took a step toward her, and she cried, "Don't— don't you duh-dare say I tuh-told you soooo! Gramp tied up most of his money in some leases before he died, and didn't leave me a fraction as much cash as folks think. I can't afford to lose that fifteen thousand dollars—much less have them laugh at me!"

"Lose fifteen grand?" I croaked. "What do you mean?"

"Sheba brought me twenty thousand shares this afternoon. She showed me slips where she supposedly paid seventy-five cents a share. I gug-gave her a check for fifteen thousand dollars."

"Why, that— All you got to do is stop the check!" I cried.

"It's tuh-too late," Karen sniffled. "The big oil companies paid their men today, and the pay window at the bank was open, up till six o'clock. Sheba cashed it there. I know; the bank called me to verify the check when Sheba presented it."

"And you don't need a keeper!" I groaned.

"Shut up!" Karen wailed. "It's your fault. Why didn't you protect me, as you were supposed to? Why don't you do something?"

I ground my gnashers, grabbed Karen's arms, and gave her a shake, howling, "I'll try to do something, and you're going to help—and none of your contrary stuff. Understand?"

"Why, you— Well, all right. What are you going to do?"

"I'm not sure, and wouldn't tell you, so you could mess up things, if I was," I yapped. "I'm going to try to get your money—"

The telephone rang. I followed Karen when she went to answer it. She listened a minute, said, "Just a moment," and covered the mouth-piece with her hand as she turned to me.

"It's Sheba," Karen said, eyeing me thinly. "She surprised a fiend in her office. The man beat her and choked her and stripped her, then tied her up. She says she can't find anything missing, but wants to know if I know where you are."

"Tell her I've quit you, and that I came here just at dark, got my pay, and left just a few minutes ago," I instructed.

Karen did as I said. After she hung up, she turned and gave me a mean look, then said, "Sheba said it

couldn't have been you, then. Dammit, did you have to strip her to get those pages?"

"I didn't strip her, or beat her," I snorted. "She had on a few things when I left her, so don't be so jealous."

"Jealous?" Karen echoed as I went toward the door. "Why, you—!"

I hurried downtown to the bootlegging joint, and found Specs nursing an empty glass. I bought drinks and found out from the guy behind the bar where Ed Redd's trucking yard was located, and urged Specs to gargle his corn and come on.

Redd was asleep in a shack back of his truck shed when I got there. I woke him up and told him what I wanted, and Redd jumped at the chance to help put the skids under Dreeker. He was dressing, yelling to wake another driver as I got back in my heap and headed through the main Goldflow field toward Dreeker's wildecat duster.

"Is your jaw jammed?" Specs asked, after a while.

"No. I was figuring," I answered, and began telling him what had happened, and what I hoped to do.

"Aw, it won't work," he predicted when I finished.

"It might. It's in my favor that Dreeker's guessing about me, and Sheba, not learning I cut out those pages, will be wondering who wanted what. That's going to help."

"Boy, I'd admired to have seen Sheba, after that tussle." Specs sighed. "I never was able to get anywhere with that dame."

"You know her well enough that you tried—you'd tried, anyhow," I said. "So when you carry out your

part of this, make her think you're doing it to try and get smooch to her."

"That part won't be no lie!" Specs declared.

SPECS knew the side trail that turned to Dreeker's well. He told me where to turn off, and we pulled up at the derrick a little later. I walked onto the derrick floor. The tools were still hanging in the rig, or scattered around. I walked back to the engine house and played my flashlight around, and found what I was hoping I'd find: A reel of greasy steel measuring line. Specs and I loaded it in the back of my wreck and we wheeled back to town. Just as we turned onto the main road, two big tank trucks passed us, heading the other way . . . Ed Redd wasn't losing any time. . . .

The welder in an all-night shop where Specs and I took the reel of line, nodded. "Sure," he said, "I can cut twenty feet out of the line and weld it back together so it'll hardly show. But why not just cut it off at the end?"

Measuring a well, a guy'll usually check the weight end of his line from habit, run it in the hole, and check his total depth, never bothering to read figures in between. Cut twenty feet out of it in between, at the well would measure that much deeper than it really was. Figure it out. I did, and I wasn't explaining it to the guy. "Just cut it off where I say," I said.

We fastened the reel up, spooled off a few hundred feet of measuring line and the welder got busy. When he finished, we put dirty grease over the mend, and you had to know

where it was and then look twice to find it. I cranked the line back on, loaded it back in my heap, and we took it back out to the Dreeker well. As we headed back for Goldflow, I noticed that Redd's trucks hadn't left any tracks on the gravelly trail.

Back in town, I let Specs out, then went to my room to grab a few hours' shuteye. A few hours was all, and I went back to the corn joint about ten that morning. Specs wasn't there, but he came in a few minutes later. Slapping me on the back, he crowed, "Oh, palsy, was Sheba ever nicer to a guy! Wah-hoo-hoo!"

"Wipe the smirk and the lipstick off your kisser, Don Juan, and tell me what, besides romance, went on up there," I growled.

"Well, I told Sheba I'd heard things about Dreeker's well, asked what she knew, and dropped some hints. She coaxed me to tell her more. I got around to saying I'd got wind of a mistake in the drilling log on that duster, and asked her if she'd drive me out there. I said I smelled a story and wanted to look into it."

"Then what?" I asked as he paused togulp my drink.

"Sheba said she hadn't heard anything, and was busy, but if I'd wait, she'd drive me out this afternoon. I left, and waited behind a car across the street. Pretty soon, Sheba came down and met Buley. They got in her car, and as they drove away, Dreeker drove out on down the street and followed them toward the field."

"Nothing to do, now, but go to Karen's and wait," I said.

"Me, too." Specs grinned. "We got a bet. Remember?"

No use trying to shoo him, so I

took him along, marveling at his crust when we walked into Karen's living room. He greeted her, "Howza Oil Princess?" and stuck out his mitt for a shake.

"Didn't I kick you out of here once?" She ignored his hand.

"Oh, I've forgiven you," he said magnanimously, and headed for the bonded Mexican whiskey in the cellarrette.

Karen glared at me, demand for an exclamation in her eyes.

"Specs has been an old pest of mine for years," I chuckled. "He's helping us sell that stock back to those crooks—I hope."

"Hard Guy!" she cried. "How can that be? I want to know—"

"All you got to know," I interrupted, "is that Buley or Sheba might come and offer to take it back. No matter what tale they tell, act natural—be contrary. And don't sell for less than a dollar a share; get more if you can."

"That's all I have to know!" Karen cried. "Why, you— Make yourselves at home," she sneered, and left the room.

 HE didn't come back in, either, until a car pulled up out front a couple of hours later, and Violinda announced. "It's Miss Sheba, an' at no'count—I means, Mist' Buley, Miss Ka'n."

"It's up to you," I warned Karen, and hustled Specs through the dining room into a service pantry, where we could crack the swinging door and hear what went on back in the living room.

"Karen!" Buley squawked as he and Sheba came in. "Karen, a ter-

rible mistake's been made. I'm sorry, but I just found out. I learned the drillers made a mistake in logging the well, and it's really a lot deeper than the log shows. That means the well really is dry. Do you understand?"

"Luckily," we heard Sheba chime in, "Dreeker doesn't know it. You see, Buley just explained to me what's been going on. I called that man who was fronting for Dreeker and told him I'd changed my mind, and could deliver him twenty thousand shares of that stock at seventy-five cents a share. He accepted. So give me your stock and I'll get your money back before Dreeker finds out he can't drill on in and get pay. We'll sting him at his own game."

"Well, I'm not so sure," Karen protested, "I want to sell. I think I'll keep the stock, just on the chance—"

There were protests, arguments, and it finally wound up with Sheba saying she'd try to get a dollar a share for the stock.

"I want it in cash, today, or I won't sell at that price," I heard Karen tell them, as I'd instructed, as she showed them out.

Karen was jubilant, even treating Specs warmly as we came back into the living room. Even my refusal to explain, now, what was up, didn't cause her to pout—very much. I grinned at Specs, asking him, "What size is your hat?"

THE afternoon dragged on. Specs amused himself mixing a lot of impossible drinks and drinking them. I just sat, while Karen tried to cool her restlessness with little household tasks. I'd begun to think that bunch

had got wise when they hadn't showed up by dark, and then I heard Sheba's car outside. I hustled back to the pantry with Specs, holding the door so I could peek out.

"Guess it took Dreeker a while to raise the money," Sheba explained the delay when she and Buley came in. "I thought that man never would show up with it, but here it is."

She pulled packets of bills from her handbag.

"There's the stock on my desk." Karen took the dough. "Do you have the transfers, or whatever it is I have to sign?"

It was quiet while the John Hancocks were being put on the line. Sheba began smiling at Buley as she put the papers in her bag.

"I'll laugh last!" Karen snapped. "Hard Guy, come on in."

"I'll stay here," Specs whispered. "If Sheba don't see me, she might not hook me in on this. There's always tomorrow—"

I shoved the door open and walked into the living room. It was just like a fish, jumping into the rain barrel to get shot! There was a crash, and the front window became a lot of little pieces on the rug, and there was a snarled, "Git 'em up!"

I froze where I was—Buley a little ahead and on my left, Karen and Sheba just to the right of me—and had a look at the muzzle of a gun poked through the broken window. From this end, it looked like 1.45 caliber! Back of that tunnel was a big guy wearing an old raincoat over his clothes and a bandanna tied over his face, and I didn't need but one guess to guess who he was.

I lifted my hands shoulder high, flicking a glance at Sheba and Buley.

Hell, they weren't half as scared as they should have been, and I cussed myself for not having suspected something when they waited until dark to fetch the bankroll for the stock. The play was for Sheba and Buley to get the stock and the signed papers, and then Flack—I was certain it was Flack—would hijack the twenty grand.

"Toss me that dough you're holdin'," Flack ordered Karen.

She gave the packets of bills a toss, but they fell short.

"You—the other broad," Flack grunted. "Pick that lettuce up off the floor and gimme it."

SHEBA stepped toward the window, and I tensed myself. Flack saw what was coming, then, and yapped, "Stop, Sheba!" too late. Sheba had stepped between Flack and me, and I speared my hand under my shirt and flipped my gun out of my belly-holster. I had a glimpse of Buley coming toward me, clawing at his hip-pocket as he swung a kick at me. I leaped away from him just as Flack's cannon roared, and the slug went *purr!* past my ear. I let go my mules, then and sent three shots through the window, so fast it sounded like one big blast. Flack just disappeared out of the square of light that glowed out through the window onto the porch.

I'd heard Karen scream while the guns were going, and heard Buley's voice raised in angry, frantic oaths. Now, I spun around as he shoved Karen away. I couldn't risk hitting her with a slug. I jumped, swinging my Colt. Buley bawled something as I laid the barrel on his biceps and a little automatic fell out of his hand.

I WAS like a waltzing mouse on a merry-go-round. I saw Sheba spring off the floor, her hands full of money, and take a run toward the dining room. A gun sounded outside, the slug going over my head. A motor roared and too-hastily-meshed gears ground, and I came up to the broken window shooting. I emptied my gun at the car that was just getting under way in front of the house, and cussed as it kept on going, gaining speed. Suddenly, then, the heap swerved wildly, and there was a sound of breaking glass and crumpling metal as it tried to climb a liveoak tree.

I heard Buley snarl, "You hell-cat!" and swung around as he shoved Karen away from him and clawed for his fallen automatic with his left hand; at the same time, I somehow managed to see the pantry door swing, and glimpsed Specs drawing a bead on Buley with a cut-glass water bottle. Specs never chunked it, though. Sheba had rounded the dining room table, and now she hit that door full tilt. It gave back a little, stopping quickly with a loud *whap!* Sheba bounced back, landed on her caboose coupling, and sat there temporarily paralyzed, packets of money scattered around her.

Sandwiched in with all this dizzy action, was the whack of my gun-barrel on Buley's head, and his groan as he went sleepy-by.

"Oh, Hard Guy!" Karen cried, and started toward me.

"Come on an' sass me—I'se ready for you now."

Karen stopped. Both of us looked toward the doorway into the hall. A razor in one hand, a kitchen cleaver

in the other, Violinda had come to join this screwy affray!

The pantry door swung out, then, and Specs crawled into the dining room on his hands and knees. He staggered to his feet, his nose bleeding, both eyes starting to swell, and to save my life, between Specs and Violinda, I couldn't help but laugh. "Haw-whoo!" I whooped at Specs. "This's good—a door run into you!"

I WASN'T laughing, though, after Karen called the sheriff and I went outside. Flack—it was Flack, right enough—was belly down, his arms and head hanging over the edge of the porch. Dark drops fell slowly off his lips into a puddle on the ground.

In the wrecked car, Dreeker was stirring back to consciousness. One of my slugs had busted his collarbone, and he had a cut on his head and a few busted ribs.

In all, it was just like the sheriff said it was when he'd gotten a sketch of the whole thing a little later. "It's the most loco mess I ever see!" he swore. "One guy dead, another one sort of busted up, an' another one nursin' a headache. Then, this-here Strang female tries to run with the *dinero*, flogs into the door an' gets flopped on her—uh, ahem, an' the door whacks Norton's nose an' he gets black eyes without even gettin' his specs broke!"

"I wasn't running away with the money!" Sheba snapped. "I was going to get it out of that hijacker's reach, is all."

"Yawrrr!" the sheriff snorted.

"You'll have a hard time convicting her, Sheriff," I said.

"I'm goin' to let her go," he decided, "with twelve hours to get to hell out of town!"

"Wait for me, Sheba," Buley snarled. "They got nothing on me, and I'll be out before that twelve hours is up."

"Like hell you will!" Dreeker croaked. "If you hadn't been chicken, you'd have done something to've kept this damned Fiard Guy from blasting Flack and wrecking me. If you think I'm going to rot 'n jail, while you and Sheba hold that stock and bring in that well, you're crazy. Sheriff, he's in as deep as me on this holdup deal!"

"And if it'll make you feel better, Dreeker," I chuckled, "I can tell you that Sheba won't be cashing in, either. You see, I doctored your measuring line. You thought the drillers had put that well down deeper than you thought, and got close to real pay without your knowing it. You thought that whiie the well was standing, then, that oil rose in the hole."

"What the hell?" Dreeker scowled at me.

"It's easy to sucker a sucker who's so busy trying to sucker somebody else he don't watch out," I jeered. "Ed Redd was glad to get hunk with you by dumping two trucks of crude oil down that hole last night!"

Dreeker cussed, then seemed to sag, and Specs cried, "Grab her, somebody!" as Sheba, spitting like a cat, made a jump at him. He stayed

back in a corner until the sheriff had shooed Sheba, and taken Flack's body, and Buley and Dreeker away.

"Well," I said, "I guess that's that."

"Yeah." Specs tossed down a big drink, found his hat and put it on. "Come on, let's go. I'll ride down town with you."

"See you tomorrow, and we'll figure what I've earned," I told Karen, and started for the door.

"Violinda," Karen called. "Violinda, you can take the rest of the night off. I won't need you here."

"Yowzum!" Violinda rolled her eyes at me and grinned.

Specs stalked to the door, turned, snatched off his hat and threw it at me, and squawked, "You win, all the way around!"

I WALKED over, poured a drink and sat down in a big easy chair. A clock ticked loudly in the room. Karen came over and stood close to me, but I didn't say a word.

"Hard Guy!" She stamped her foot. "What's the matter?"

"Maybe I'm practicing being contrary," I grunted.

Karen came up and leaned against the chair. I looked up. She had a strange expression on her face. I noticed that she'd lost several buttons off her dress in the scuffle.

"Y-you better be careful," I croaked. "I'm poison ivy."

"And I'm hard to poison, Mister," she murmured.

In the Microscope

A piece of string tells a story of running water, pine trees, rabbits, a cow and a horse. What does it all mean?



NHIS authoritative volume on various systems of crime detection, Hans Gross, a noted pioneer in the field of scientific criminology and police methods, devoted an entire chapter to the fascinating subject of microscopic "traces" in their relationship to the apprehension of wrongdoers.

"Traces," in the nomenclature of Gross, consist of anything in the nature of clues which a criminal might leave behind him at the scene of his crime. Nor need such clues be visible to the naked eye. Sometimes they can be seen, of course—such objects as fingernail clippings, a rope fiber, a small bloodstain. But very often the damning evidence may be as minute as a fragment of hair, a cuticle scale, or even a flake of dandruff.

To be of value in police procedure, such traces must be given the attention of an expert micro-analyst. In the hands of the trained microscopist-detective, criminal identification becomes a simple matter of recognition by magnification.

Two pioneer specialists in the field gave microscope-detection its real start in the United States. The first was the late Dr. Albert Schneider, who occupied the post of dean at the School for Police Officers in Berkeley, California. He died in 1929, but in his lifetime he was a

genius—one might almost call him a magician—with a microscope.

His career was devoted to a comprehensive study of police methods, espionage, counter-espionage and criminology in connection with the sciences of botany, normal cell structure, pathology and bacteriology. The tale is told how Dr. Schneider was once handed a few sticks of dynamite, fused and capped, that had been found close to the residence of a prominent Californian. Unquestionably the dynamite had been intended as a murder bomb. But who had planted the explosive?

Dr. Schneider removed the dynamite from its paper and burlap package. The wrappings, together with a length of string which had tied the sticks together, were placed in water and agitated. Then the water was poured off, distilled, and the residue examined under the microscope.

In his report, Dr. Schneider said that the twine had come from a farm containing a stream of running water, pine trees, white and black rabbits, a cream-colored cow and a bay horse. All these inferences were drawn from microscopic examination of the debris taken from the package—residue invisible to the unaided human eye.

Subsequent investigation traced the dynamite to the dealer who had

(Continued on page 96)

The Lady

By PRESCOTT GRATTAN



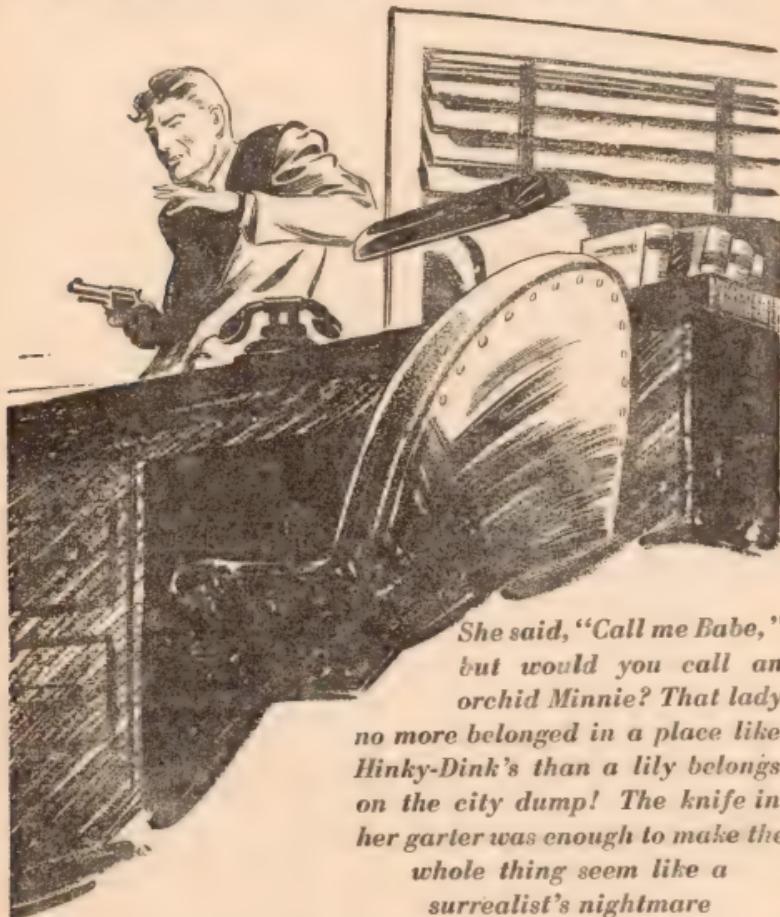
He didn't jump for me, but went over the desk and got the girl around the waist.



HERE is sawdust on the floor, a nickel piano in the corner, a long bar with a fly-specked mirror behind it, and three red-nosed, unshaven customers hov-

ering over the dried-up slices of liverwurst and the hard bread called Free Lunch. A guy has to hold his nose to keep from gagging on the odor of stale beer. That is Hinky-Dink's, the tough barroom where I

Called "Babe"



*She said, "Call me Babe,"
but would you call an
orchid Minnie? That lady
no more belonged in a place like
Hinky-Dink's than a lily belongs
on the city dump! The knife in
her garter was enough to make the
whole thing seem like a
surrealist's nightmare*

am sitting at a table nursing a bottle of Mr. Calvert's best, when it all began.

I said tough barroom, but not so tough. A guy wanting to buy murder and mayhem wouldn't go to Hinky-Dink's. But a guy wanting to get a lush rolled or a spare tire

stolen was in the right spot. Likewise, a guy like me, Ned Foss, private dick, could buy a lot of information there—from rats. In my business it pays to keep in touch with the rat market, and if a guy wants to make friends of the rats he has to go where the rats are.

So, there I was in Hinky-Dink's, nursing a grouch and a bottle and not seeing anyone I know. Dames come to Hinky's pretty often; ladies, never. Which is why I was so surprised when the front door opened with a bang and the lady shot into the room. It was a lady, not a dame, if you see what I mean.

She wore a yellow raincoat, all wet and glistening with raindrops. Her hair was the same color as the raincoat, honestly, and rain gleamed and glimmered on that, too, for she wore no hat. She'd been fighting the wind and rain for a block or two at least. Rain was on her face, drops of water clung to her long dark lashes like tears. Her mouth was vivid, like she'd slashed it with a lip-stick in a hurry.

She stood there just inside the door staring about, and the wind had whipped the coat about her until every line of her body was revealed. Whew!

Hinky-Dink himself was tending bar. He dropped the glass he was shining and dropped his lower lip almost as far. Every eye in the room was on the lady, for she didn't belong in a joint like that any more than a lily belongs on the city dump! Then she saw me.

The strained, scared look left her face. She sort of preened herself; the soft lines of her mouth dissolved into a damned good imitation of a professional leer, and she swaggered toward me. Swaggered is the word. Her voice was sort of low and harsh, with just the suggestion of a tremor. She said, "H'ya Ned, old pal. Been waiting for me long?"

And before I could make an answer, she'd pulled out a chair and

sank down into it, her eyes glittering feverishly at me. Her lips not moving at all this time she *sotto voce*, "Play up, please. Act like you know me, talk a minute then put a nickel in the piano; a loud piece."

I did. I called for a second glass, and played up. His little pig eyes glowing, Hinky wabbled over with another drink—on the house—and I introduced them. When I came to her name, she smiled that leering smile at Hinky and said, "Just call me Babe, sport!"

Would you call an orchid Minnie?

I dropped the nickel I'd been palming, stooped to get it. In a two-second glance beneath the table, I saw her slender pumps and ankles, hooked about the legs of the chair. Her hose were sheer and shadowy—as if those legs needed anything to call attention to them—but what got me was the little leather strap circling her left thigh. Attached to it was a four-inch leather sheath, and from the sheath protruded the curved haft of a slim knife!

An orchid named Minnie! A newborn babe with a machine-gut! A lady out of the rain wearing a slicker, stockings, a knife and very little else! It didn't track.

SOMEBODY put a slug in the music box. It looked like Hinky-Dink was with us for the rest of the night, but the little lady rose up and said, "Let's dance, sport, let's dance!"

And once in my arms she whispered, "Hold me close, so they won't see us talking."

Sure. It was a pleasure. I'm not

so old that I can't enjoy such. The way she kept her own arms wrapped about me, her knee touching mine at every step . . . ! Whew! No wonder I could hardly make sense out of what she said. Halfway through the piece I got it—and damned near stopped dancing.

Would I like to see Dan Boerne? Hell, who wouldn't! Dan Boerne, the big shot fence and banker of the middle west, the only rival Rothstein ever had! Why would I like to see him? Simply because the G-boys were looking for him with an indictment for income tax evasion. Because half the underworld was looking for him to cut his throat for crossing them. Not only had Big Dan disappeared, but he'd taken most of his assets with him, stuff given him to fence by various crooks.

And here was this little lady asking me if I'd like to see him. And I couldn't jump up and down and yell hurrah!

I liked the way she clung to my arm and looked so lovingly up into my eyes as we went past Hinky-Dink. I didn't like the way she got in my car and wrapped the slicker about her, pulled over in her own corner and waited for me to start. And the way she kept glancing back through the rear window as I headed into the rain wasn't very encouraging. The lady was scared of being followed.

I torched up and said, "Give. All of it. Who are you? Why did you come to me? How do you know where Big Dan is holed up?"

She said: "Turn right at the next alley and let's see if that car's following us."

It was. It took me ten minutes to

lose them. And then I asked her again.

"A friend of mine," she hesitated; her voice wasn't harsh now. It was anxious—"told me the kind of joints you hang around. I've been to a jillion of them tonight." Hesitation again. I kept driving. "I came to you because I couldn't go to the police. Don't ask me any more."

"Go on. Who are you? Why are you turning up Big Dan?"

"Never mind any of that." She laid a hand on my knee, a hand whose fingers closed and gripped convulsively. "You'll have to take my word for it that I'm on the up and up. I'm taking you to Big Dan. The rest is up to you. Why, is another matter, none of your business. Who I am—well," she grinned, "just call me Babe!"

Sure, I pried around, I asked more, and it did me no good. Big Dan Boerne was always a high flyer. This might even be the type of dame he could afford, the type that was his weakness. Maybe she was sick of him and was turning him up; maybe he'd crossed her like he crossed everyone else. Maybe—hell, there were too many maybes!

The only thing I was sure of was that a half-dressed dame who looked like an angel but wore a man-killing knife and not much else, was in the car with me, her hand on my knee, telling me how to get to Big Dan Boerne. And for Big Dan I could collect me a little matter of two thousand coconuts. So sure, I was nice to her. A man is always nice to money.

At Ashby and Carolina she stopped me and made her proposition. I could take it or leave it. So

I took it, naturally. There was her hand on my knee again, her face not far from mine, the smell of her hair, the flash of her eyes,—oh, what the hell!

Not just the idea of that lithe, alluring form beneath the slicker, half revealed, but because I still figured she was a lady, not a dame. A lady in spite of knowing Big Dan; a lady in spite of the knife. So I agreed, although she wasn't fooling anyone. She had hunted me up and was sending me against Big Dan because he had something she wanted, and because she knew I had a rod and knew how to use it.

Then I noticed the ring for the first time. Maybe it decided me. She wore it on the third finger of her left hand, like an engagement ring. It was a diamond, all right, but not the kind of diamond Big Dan's dame would sport.

This one was set in a heavy, carved surface, a man's ring. Curious, I picked up her hand and looked at the ring. It showed a nude dame kneeling, as if overburdened, and the diamond setting was the load on her back. Don't forget that ring, it's important.

YOU'D never have known the house was an apartment building. It was one of those big old houses, once tops in a swell part of town that had seen the city build its little business joints about it until it was out of place. From the outside, discounting the second-hand tire shops and the beer joints around it, it looked like a mansion. But inside, it had been converted into a dozen little two-by-four apartments. The names of the occupants weren't

even on the box. It just said SMITH, in big letters. But Babe had set me right.

I left her in the car and had the old .41 in my hand the minute I crawled through the front door. Big Dan was a tough nut; I took no chance. On up the steps, through another hall to the back door on the left. I waited there for a minute, catching my breath. My fingers closed on the knob. Twisted. I quit. Right away. The door gave; it was open. Maybe I talked there, to myself, for a minute. I don't remember it. Don't forget, the G-boys and half the sheriffs of the Valley were looking for this boy. I took a deep breath and hit the door with my shoulder, plunged into darkness.

Nothing happened.

Beside the door I found the switch and flipped it. Big Dan was there.

I put the .41 back in its holster, for Big Dan wasn't dangerous any more. I've seen a lot of messy killings, but this one was the worst. He sat slumped over a telephone table, his cheek and right hand against the book. Once the shirt had been white. Now it was red, and I could have sworn blood was still oozing from the three slots in his back.

I didn't touch a thing, just stood there, gawking, looking around. There must have been five cases of whiskey bottles stacked around in the corners. Near his feet was a broken glass and an overturned bottle. Big Dan evidently had tried to drown his troubles, had been drinking when that keen blade ended them for him.

Okay, I lost my head. Don't forget a knife did this job. Don't forget a knife had been noted by yours

truly. Strapped on the thigh of a dame whose name must have been Babe, who was waiting for me down in my own automobile. I was there in split seconds.

"Did you get it?" she whispered, eyes wide, lips parted.

I said, "Clever, aren't you? But not clever enough. I never touched a thing, lady, I haven't been here and I never heard of Big Dan Boerne. Where do I throw you out of this hack?"

Either she was a damned good actress or she didn't know what I was talking about. She grabbed me by the shoulder, put her face right into mine and began firing questions. So I let her have it. Her face went white; her rouge was two deep red spots as she sank back, frightened, in her part of the seat.

"And you think I—?"

I didn't answer. I simply leaned forward and parted the raincoat. The glow from the dashlight made her soft skin golden where it gleamed above her stocking top.

She didn't stop me when I fumbled at the sheath, and drew out the knife. It was razor sharp, a thin, curved blade, wicked and lethal. And there wasn't a stain, not a drop of dried blood on that blade. My fingers shook a little as I put it back.

"Satisfied?" When I looked at her, I was. She couldn't have cut Big Dan's throat so cold-bloodedly, not this lady! She read it in my eyes, moved toward me and a note of desperation crept into her voice. "We made an agreement, Mr. Foss. Dead or alive Dan Boerne has something I want, something I have to have. I could have turned him over to the police and they'd have taken

everything for evidence. So I came to you. Will you go back and get it for me?"

She was so desperate, so little and sort of unprotected. Hell, my heart swelled in my breast, I started to say something, but she interrupted softly: "I knew you would. I knew it!"

Her arms shot around my neck, her half parted lips were hot and moist against mine. Sure, I kissed her. Why not? I remember her pulling away, her eyes all starry, saying, "Darling, when you come back—!"

I DUCKED my head to the rain and went back into the house. I made my first slip because I was in too big a hurry. I slammed into a screen. Nothing seemed to happen for a moment; I tiptoed on. And suddenly the first door on the left shot open and the hall was flooded with a square of light. A dame's voice said, "Jimmie? Jimmie? Who—my Gawd, Ned!"

The light was behind her and I didn't recognize her for a moment, that is, not her face. It was about one-thirty in the morning and the dame had probably been sleeping. Anyway she stood there with a negligee thrown about her, half on, half off, her hair all tousled. I grinned.

"Jude McIntyre, by golly!" I popped. "I didn't even know you were back in town!"

Her face grew sullen, her eyes flamed, she threw the door wide. "Come in," her voice was toneless, her whole figure seemed to droop hopelessly. And in the three steps I used coming in I thought a lot.

Four years before I'd helped send this dame to the pen! I'd shot her

gangster boy friend, I'd put the screws on her. And here she was living in the same house with a dead man that once had been Big Dan Boerne.

I lit a smoke and waited. She half sat on the edge of the table, fumbled for a cigarette herself and eyed me sullenly. I said, "The pen put weight on you, kid. You're looking like a million." All dames like words like that. She sort of swelled up and ran her hands over herself; some of the sullenness left. She leaned toward me.

"Let me alone, will you, Ned? I'm going straight as a die!" She thought I was here after her! "I've been running this apartment house for eight months now, Ned. If you dicks will leave me alone I'll have a chance. I'm off the dope, got cured in the big house. I'm living right—and I like it. Will you let me alone."

There was always something about Jude that got to a guy, something slumbering just below the surface, behind the sullen eyes, the sullen mouth. Some way I got to contrasting her with the woman waiting in my car. The one in the car was a lady. Jude was a dame, just another dame, if you see the difference. Jude figured I was undecided, probably. She used what she had to fight with. She walked toward me sinuously, her body swaying beneath the thin negligee. She stood so close to me that her body was only inches from my chest.

Her eyes were half veiled, she laid a hand on my forearm and slid it up to my shoulder.

"You got pull in this town, Ned. Pull. You've located me, but I'm go-

ing straight as a string, I tell you. Don't tell the rest of the coppers where I am; what I'm doing. Just keep it to yourself, won't you? I always liked you, Ned, even in spite of everything. Keep the address to yourself—but don't forget it, if you know what I mean?"

What the hell? I knew what she meant and felt sorry for her. Poor kid, she was doing all she knew, she was using the only weapons she had to keep me from making life miserable for her. I was damned near ashamed of myself when I kissed her, but hell! I couldn't help it. I'll say this, even if she was building me up, she kissed me! And how! Somehow I got out into the hall, went out the front door and waited a few seconds until I saw her door close. Then I went back in.

BIG DAN was still at the table with the phone before him, and he still wasn't nice to look at. I started to walk around him, slipped on something and almost fell. It was a pencil. For the first time I looked at the book before Dan, the one his head was resting on. It was a telephone directory, bloodstained, soaked in blood. And there was a pencil mark running down the edge of the directory. It began halfway up the page at a name—a name that surprised me—then bore to the bottom, getting deeper and deeper until at last it tore clear through the page and off the margin. Looked pretty plain. Big Dan Boerne, pencil in hand, had been looking up a phone number when the killer stuck a shiv in his back.

Beneath a pile of shirts in a suitcase beneath the bed I found the

She said, "Come in and sit down, but keep your hands in sight."



manila envelope I'd been sent for. It was big and tough, three inches thick, bulging with something or other. And it was sealed in three places with big splotches of red seal-

ing wax. Now what, I asked myself, could the mysterious "just call me Babe" who was waiting in my car, want with this? What was it? Hell, I'd promised to bring it to

her, but I was going to stay with her until I found out what that envelope—

Wham!

I wasn't Ned Foss any more. I was just a punk dropping a thousand feet off a precipice into a whirling blackness filled with shooting stars, a punk with a bursting head diving toward a floor that was rushing up to meet me. Then I was nothing, nothing at all.

PRETTY soon someone was bathing my face, someone was putting a bottle neck between my teeth. I sucked at it, opened my eyes, saw Sergeant Luther of Homicide grinning down at me and managed to get to my feet. The room was full of coppers. Somebody had thrown a sheet over Big Dan. Two boys from the papers were snapping pictures and Jude McIntyre was leaning sullenly against the wall, the scant negligee wrapped tightly about her. In answer to my questions Luther pointed his thick thumb at her. "She said she saw you slipping back in, heard you come upstairs, then heard a thump. So she called copper."

"I run a decent house," snapped Jude. "I'm clean as a whistle and I don't aim for you or anyone else to come gumshoeing around starting trouble."

I said, "Decent house? And Big Dan Boerne holed up here?"

She whitened. "He said his name was Smith, Robert Smith. How would I know he was a big shot crook with me being out of touch with things so long?"

Ten minutes later I was going down the steps. Hell, it was easy

to prove I didn't knife Big Dan. I'm a dick, a tough dick. I use a gun. Besides, the reward on his head was for a live man, not a dead one! I managed to keep the Babe in my car out of it, said I'd got the tip from the usual underworld sources, and I didn't say a word about that package she wanted, that sealed bank envelope. But here's the funny thing. Lying on a table were the few clues the coppers had found. There were the pencil, the contents of Dan's pockets, a cigarette butt, and a clot of dark red sealing wax. Whoever had busted me on the head had stuck around long enough to open the envelope. That's what they were after. Well, the Babe in the car would know why, and by God! she was going to tell me.

She didn't, for she wasn't there! At first I figured she'd seen the cops arrive and had hid out. Then my feet got tangled up in the raincoat on the floorboards and I knew better.

No lady would go gallavanting around in the rain wearing only underthings, sheer hose, slippers and a knife in a sheath. Outside of the raincoat that was all she'd been wearing! There wasn't any blood, no sign of a struggle. Nevertheless, I was worried, plenty worried.

I cruised around the block so many times I got dizzy, trying to put it all together. No soap, no spinach. Finally, cold and wet and discouraged, I gave up. A waiter at a coffee pot knew where to get hold of a bottle even at 3:30 in the morning. I spent a good hour with it—using coffee for a chaser. It must have been quite a little later than four o'clock when I slipped my key

in the lock and entered my own room.

Jude McIntryre was sitting cross-legged on the divan, her long silken legs gleaming, a cigarette in her mouth. She had her hand in a purse, and the bulge wasn't made just by her hand. She said, "Come in, Ned, and sit down, but keep your hands in sight." I did. And I didn't grin. She looked mean. "Where is it, Ned?" Now I turned that one over and over quick. I had an idea, so I tested it.

"You'll never find it, Jude. I've got it tucked away safely."

Her breast began to heave; color fled her face. The hand came out of the bag, slowly, and the little gun gleamed and glistened evilly. Her voice almost choked her. "I haven't got much time, Ned. I've been a damned fool right along, but I'm over it now. I'm framed for a rap and I'm not going to take it. In about two hours the coppers are going to be after me. I want that envelope, Ned, and I'll get it. Give. Where is it?" She raised the gun again. I grinned.

"You won't shoot, Jude. If I'm dead, I can't talk, can I? Don't be a fool."

She lowered the gun, waited a second and tossed it aside. Then she came over and stood before me. I stood up, facing her. Her mouth twisted, she put her hands on my shoulders. She said, "Look at me, Ned, look at me. I can't make you tell me where you ditched it, but I'm asking you to. I did a stretch because of you, Ned. Now you can be a good guy and help me from doing another. I'm desperate. I've been going straight, but after this,

who's to believe me. You kissed me tonight, Ned, you held me close, and you liked it." Her voice lowered to a whisper. "Tell me, Ned, I'll . . . do . . . anything. . ." And she sounded as if she meant it.

She sort of swayed into my arms, she sagged limply so that I was pulled around. Hell, my blood began to answer hers. I'm not so old.



ND suddenly something hard and unyielding was rammed into my kidney. Jude smiled in my arms and pulled away while I raised my hands. Somebody snatched the .41 from its holster, a rough hand whirled me around.

I said, "Morning, Freddie. Still hanging around Jude? Still a two-bit punk?"

Freddie Nestle dropped me to my knees with the barrel of his gat. While I was still shaking my head to clear it Jude pulled off my belt, lashed my hands behind me and then jerked me to my feet. I sort of sagged against the wall. Jude said, "You're a rat and a louse, Ned. I'm going to have those bonds if Freddie has to beat them out of you. Freddie would enjoy doing it, too. You hung a rap on him along with me, a rap he wasn't ready for. No more am I ready for this caper. Where are those bonds?"

Bonds? So it was bonds in that manila envelope! I shook my head and grinned. She pushed me, pushed me so hard I stumbled across the room and sprawled on the bed. Then they were on me. It's hard to fight with your hands tied, with a guy

whaling away with a rod at the back of your head. So pretty soon I was still.

Jude sprawled over me, holding my head down into the pillow so I couldn't yell, and she had the strength of desperation in her soft body. Freddie Nestle straddled my hips, held my tied wrists. Fire shot up my right thumb. I tried to yell, felt Jude's fingers in my hair as she pushed my face into the pillow.

She loosened up in a minute. "It's a nailfile," she grated, "and he's only started. You'll talk by the time he gets it half an inch farther beneath the nail. Well?" I bit my lips to keep from yelling. "Go on, Freddie. Give it to him!"

Knock-knock-knock at the door. She shoved my head down tighter. Again the knock. She began to swear. I worked my head free. "Okay, Jude," I grinned, "you might as well have the truth. I haven't got the bonds, but I can get them. You can't kill me, not with someone at the door. Cut me loose and I'll cover you, see? And we can get together later on."

What else could they do? A minute later I opened the door and Jude and Freddie pushed out, past my latest caller. Who was none other than the "just call me Babe" lady I'd left in my car.

Somewhere she'd picked up a man's topcoat. Above it her face was pasty white, her eyes wild and luminous, her lips quivering. And damned if she still didn't look like a lady!

She took two quick steps across the room as I closed the door, and when I turned, collapsed on the rug. I stooped over her, drew back,

startled. Her arms were flung wide, one silk stocking leg was doubled beneath her. Her left hand was red and glistening with blood. It took only seconds to split the sleeve of that coat with a razor blade. On the soft, fleshy part of her upper arm was a three-inch, jagged cut, not deep, but nasty. She didn't open her eyes as I laid her on the bed, sponged off her arm and taped the edges of the wound together.

I don't know how long I stood there gazing down at her. It was a funny feeling. Hell, I'm tough, I've been around. I had no business in the same room with that babe. She was a *lady*. It was in every classic line of her figure. And her mixed up in a nasty thing like this. You'll get a snicker out of this. Me, tough old Ned Foss, I leaned over and kissed her on the brow and then pulled a blanket over her. Then I went out and hustled a bottle.

She was awake when I got back, sitting on the edge of the bed with the blanket about her shoulders. The minute I opened the door she said, "Did you get it? Oh, please did you get it?"

I HATED like hell to tell her. I poured us a few drinks, got her beside me on the davenport and told her everything that had happened, how I'd been slugged, how Jude and Freddie Nestle had been working me over, all of it. She simply collapsed and began to sob. Me, I can't stand crying women. I pulled her up close, held her tight against my chest. The kid was worn out, she'd been through hell.

Can I be blamed for promising to dig up that envelope, those bonds,

for her. I'd have promised her the moon. Weariness and the liquor got her. She sat there in my arms, blanket forgotten, and told me most of it. Some of it I missed, some I got.

It was hard to keep my mind on it.

In that envelope were eighty grand in bonds from the Stockyards National hold-up of three months ago! Big Dan Boerne had either



The whole thing was a nightmare. Why should anybody have killed her?

bought them or was going to fence them, when he got in his jam with the G-boys and had to take to the sticks and high timber.

How did she know? What did she want with them? She didn't tell me, and I didn't pry too far. Maybe she was Dan's girl friend and soured on him. Maybe she was a crook herself. Maybe — hell, I didn't care what she was. Looking down at her all sweet and warm and tired there in my arms, I couldn't picture her as Dan Boerne's girl. Yet where did she fit in?

The cut arm? Yeah, I asked.

"After you went back the second time he drove by and saw me there." Her eyes closed wearily. "You've been swell so far. Don't ask me who I mean. It won't help. Anyway he took me from your car and locked me up. I broke a window to escape and climbed down some vines. I cut my arm on the glass. That's all, Ned!" I could scarcely hear her, she was dozing. And by God, suddenly I felt big and heroic like an old knight or something. I pulled her closer to me, held her tight.

"I'll get them for you, honey," I whispered, like a moonstruck kid. "I don't know how, but you can count on me. I'll drop them in your lap!"

She smiled sleepily. Then her arm slid around my neck as I picked her up and walked to the bed with her. She was asleep when I laid her down. She didn't even feel me lean over and kiss her—not on the brow this time....

I LEFT her a note after a while and started out. It was around nine, I guess, when I wheeled the

old hack out of the garage and headed into the rain. It must have been noon when I got a definite idea. I remembered that telephone directory under Big Dan's body, remembered where the pencil line had started. J. J. Raney, had been the name. And young J. J. Raney was the vice president of the Stockyards National that had been looted! Had Dan been fixing to call him and maybe turn back the bonds? There were a lot of angles there. It was worth a trial, anyway.

A few minutes later I started up the drive of the Raney house, pulled right to let a small truck come by. The lettering on the side said, "John Doe, Glazing," but I paid no attention then.

Raney was a big blond, about thirty-five, and well known through the state. He led the way to his library, the butler poured us a drink and Raney began to talk.

"Cops," said he quietly, "are really efficient, aren't they?" I grinned politely. "Sergeant Luther has already been here, and I told him certain things. You, being a private cop, I'm going to tell certain other things. In confidence. For a fee."

I sat up straighter. "First," he went on, "I never knew Dan-Boerne, never. Second, I own the property where he was murdered. That much I told Luther. Now I am going to throw myself on your mercy and tell you some things that would ruin me utterly if they got out. So I trust you."

As he talked, he kept fingering his toothbrush mustache. I couldn't help noticing the ring on his little finger. It was a diamond. *And the*

diamond was on the back of a kneeling nude woman.

"In three weeks time I am to be married to a very lovely girl, Ned, the daughter of Senator Marshall."

He slid a picture from a desk drawer and held it to me. I nearly swallowed the cigar he'd given me. Senator Marshall's daughter was "just call me Babe," sleeping now, I hoped, in my hotel room. "I can't afford to have any scandal that will wreck that marriage. But I am confessing to you that I have been playing around with Jude McIntyre. I am a member of the parole board, you know, and first became acquainted with her in prison. I was sorry for her. When she came out, I gave her that job as manager of the apartment house.

"I thought she was going straight, that she was cured. All this I told Sergeant Luther. What I did not tell him was that she came here this morning. She said she was in trouble and would have to run for it. And she gave me a package to keep for her, made me swear not to take it to the police, or to open it. When I learned this morning that Dan Boerne was killed in the apartment, I became suspicious. No doubt she had something to do with it. So I have decided to turn the package over to you, to let you do with it as you like."

For the third time in ten minutes I choked on the cigar. For the thing he laid on top of the desk was the thick manila bank envelope sealed in three places with wax! The one I'd had in my hands once before when I got cracked out like a light. Here was eighty grand worth of stolen bonds, bonds lifted from this

guy's own bank, and he didn't know it!

TEN minutes later, over a phone

I spoke to Sergeant Luther. "Never mind where I got them," I laughed, "I'm sending them to you. Eighty grand worth. That's why Dan Boerne was wiped out. And I might give you one little tip. If it was me, I'd pick up Jude McIntyre. Don't say I didn't tell you. Jude McIntyre and Freddie Nestle." I slammed up the phone,

At home I said, "Afternoon, Miss Marshall!"

She jumped up from the divan and the blanket fell to the floor. So, I told her. I told her the police had the bonds, and I told her where I got them, who had them.

"Thank God," she whispered, "he turned them in!"

I didn't quite get that one. What else would a guy like J. J. Raney do but turn them in, a big shot like him?

And before I could ask her a lot of questions that were troubling me, such as where in the hell she got acquainted with Big Dan Boerne? And who yanked her out of my car? Whose window she had jammed through? and the like — before I could ask her anything like that she had her arms around my neck and was kissing me, plenty.

A guy forgets a lot of things in a case like that, with a pair of slim arms pulling his mouth down to a pair of warm, parted lips. It all happened fast then.

I don't remember sitting down with her on my lap, I don't remember kissing her. I do remember the touch of her, the softness, the

warmness. Maybe it was just thankfulness. Or maybe she liked me!

TH E phone rang. I answered it. It was Sergeant Luther, bawling the hell out of me. "Bonds," he said, "eighty grand in bonds? Hell, that envelope was full of cut paper, and nothing else."

I snapped, "Then pick up the Mc-Intyre dame. She made the switch, pick her up!"

"We did," answered Sergeant Luther, dryly. "Picked her up north of town with her head all caved in, dead as hell. You better come down here and tell me all you know! This is a nightmare. Why a killer would wrap a dead woman and a slightly used stick of sealing wax in an army blanket and toss them in the bushes is—hell! Come down!"

Maybe I rode an hour, maybe two hours, after leaving Headquarters. I told you I could think better driving. And still it wasn't all clear. As a matter of fact, it was worse muddled up than ever. Sure, I had hunches. But hunches are tricky things. I ended up parked a block from J. J. Raney's house, and then walked the rest of the way to it, went over the hedge and slipped up on the east side.

Don't ask me what I expected to find. I don't know. But I'm damned thankful I went in the way I did. Here's what I kissed in on, once I forced the French doors and paused in the darkness of a solarium.

A woman's scream, high, shrill, agonized. A man's laugh, as mad as the scream. The sound of a blow, the thud of a falling body. A moan. And the same demoniac laughter. Bloodchilling? Hell, yes. I slid

through the darkness and into the hall toward the library and parted the velvet curtains.

The first thing I saw was J. J. Raney, tied in his heavy chair, a handkerchief over his mouth, his eyes protruding. And there was Freddie, Freddie Nestle, a gun in his hand, madness on his face, saliva drooling from his thin lips. And there was Babe, the senator's daughter crouched at his feet; Freddie's left hand was wound in her hair, straining her head back painfully.

"Killed!" screamed Freddie. "The woman I loved — beat to death! This is *your* woman, see how you like it!"

His cruel fingers jerked Babe erect, his mad eyes gloated at her agony. The revolver whipped at her and the blow tore a deep furrow across her shoulder, left a bloody trail on white skin.

I should have shot him. Instead I jumped, and when he whirled, let him have it on the sconce. He dropped like a poleaxed steer.

Babe wasn't out. She managed to get to her feet, managed to stagger across the room to where Raney was tied. Her fingers cut him loose and he jerked the gag from his mouth.

"There's your killer," he snapped. "He must have found out Jude crossed him, substituted paper for the bonds, and killed her. Then, thinking maybe I knew where the real ones were, he came here."

Raney leaped to his desk, half screaming, "Did you see what he did to Marie? Did you see—" He tore a gun from the drawer, leaped toward the fallen Freddie and fired before I could prevent it.

Marie Marshall screamed. I grappled with Raney. I'll swear you could hear the second bullet hit Freddie! Raney was raging like a mad man, utterly demented. I finally got the gun, tossed it on the desk and got him sitting down. Marie looked up from Freddie, her voice hoarse, her eyes oddly glinting.

"Once in the head, once in the stomach. He won't talk now, Jimmie!"

Raney gulped, reached for the phone. I stopped him. "Let me alone," he said, "I'm calling the police. Here's your killer!" I let him call. He hung up with a smile of triumph.

I said, "Marie, or Babe, or whatever your name is, this is going to hurt you. But it's all for the best. Okay, Raney, you called the police to come after a killer. They'll be here in a few moments. Want to tell me what you did with the bonds?"

MARIE sighed. Raney's mouth opened; he laughed.

I shrugged. "You can tell me or the police can beat it out of you. I'll give you the story if you like. Marie knew the circumstances. She was your fiancee. And she loved you; maybe she still does. You knew the McIntyre woman, gave her a job after she was paroled. She recognized Big Dan when he rented a place from her, asked you what to do. I've got an idea they'll find your accounts pretty short at the bank. Anyway, you needed dough. You had Jude keep Big Dan undercover, had her keep him drunk for weeks. And during that time he must have cracked about eighty grand

worth of bonds—*stolen from your own bank.*

"You'd already collected one hundred and sixty grand insurance for that hold-up. That's the figure your books showed. But if Dan Boerne was taken by the Feds and cracked, that the real loot was only eighty grand—and he had the bonds to prove it!—you'd be in the soup. So you killed Dan. I know you did it, because when I went into the apartment house poor Jude opened the door and called me Jimmie. Jimmie was you. She knew you were upstairs."

Raney wasn't laughing now. Nor Marie. Her eyes were pin-points of light on her fiance's face.

"Jude wanted a cut. She knew you were fixing to get married, knew you were throwing her over. You told her you didn't get the bonds, though you did, after clouting me out of the picture. She figured me for them, rounded up Freddie Nestle and came after me. Marie nipped their play in the bud."

I turned to Marie. She had picked the topcoat from the floor, had it about her slender shoulders.

"You loved him, didn't you, Babe? How'd you find out what he was planning to do?"

She almost whispered, "I was waiting for him in the library that night. He didn't know I was here. He brought her, Jude McIntyre, here and I heard their plans. I couldn't believe it of Jim! I thought she must have him bewitched! When I confronted him with it after she had gone, he promised to let it drop. But I was afraid. That's why I went to you. You could have gotten the bonds, I could have destroyed them

and no one would ever have known!" She bowed her head and began to cry.

It was damned sad.

"And he got suspicious," I went on, "watched the apartment. He took you out of my car, brought you here and locked you up. But you broke the window and escaped. Funny, Raney, how one murder makes another, isn't it? It was all going to be so easy! And when I kissed in on it, and when Jude began getting tough about it, you figured her to take the fall. Wasn't that something! You extracted the real bonds, filled the envelope with paper and sealed it with wax. Then you killed Jude!"

"It's a lie!"

"The hell it is. You damned fool, you even threw your sealing wax in the same blanket with the body. Didn't you ever hear of microscopes? Boy, if the wax they found with the body matches the wax on that envelope full of fakes—and it will—you're as good as in—Hey!"

He didn't jump for me. He dove over the desk and grabbed Marie Marshall around the waist. Over and over they rolled on the floor, a welter of white, kicking legs and arms and straining muscles. I leaped in, poised for a quick shot and saw what he had. He had the four-inch knife I'd first seen in her leg sheath, had the point buried a quarter inch in her white throat. "Drop the gun," he snarled. "I'll cut her throat if you don't!"

He had his back to Freddie Nestle. He couldn't see Freddie, but I could. Freddie's eyes were wide, his mouth was twisted with pain. His face was bloody, the front of

his body was a welter of gore. His trembling fingers were inching toward the fallen gun a few feet away. And I began to talk. What I said, I don't know. I argued with Raney, I told him he had no chance, I described the hot seat for him. Anything to gain time. Maybe I prayed, maybe I cursed. But at last Raney tired. He said, "Damn you, I'm counting to five. One! Two! Three!"

And as he said three, Freddie Nestle shot him. I let him lie where he fell, the louse. But Freddie Nestle died in my arms. The last thing he said was, "Jude was—swell kid —no chance—loved her like—hell!"

THE rest, you read in the papers. They found the bonds, all right, in Raney's safety deposit box. I took Marie back to my place, wrapped in that damned topcoat. I held her in my arms all the way home, too. And we were in the house taking a drink before I realized that me, tough old Ned Foss, was hobnobbing with a Senator's daughter, a *lady!*

She sat down beside me, so close, warm and tingling. She leaned over and kissed me on the ear. "Tell me what's wrong, Ned?"

I said, "Hell's bells! What do I know about ladies? I don't even know how to treat them, I don't even know what to call you!"

Before I could stop her she'd crawled into my lap, pulled my arms about her. Her eyes were sort of smouldering, her lips were loose and red and wet, sort of twisted in a taunting grin. She whispered, "Don't treat me like a lady! And just call me Babe. I love it!"

HOLLYWOOD CHISELRY

*Bad publicity can ruin a movie star—
which explains why an actor bucking a
confidence man has the cards
stacked against him*



THE familiar faces we see nightly flitting across the nation's silverscreens in countless hundreds of movie theaters are not those of supermen or superwomen. Motion picture actors and actresses are as fallible and as vulnerable to trickery as their non-professional fellow citizens—and as prone to be victimized by the schemes of chiselers. Gullibility is a human trait, and Hollywood's luminaries suffer the fault as well as anyone else.

Despite the sedulous efforts made by movie players to guard themselves, dozens of confidence rackets are successfully worked against them. Because such matters are rarely given publicity, however, the crooks have a seeming advantage. Many a star has borne financial loss rather than be made the butt of uncomplimentary news items.

As an example, there was Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle, late big-time comic star of silent pictures. He was one of the first movie actors to own a specially built automobile—and what a car it was! Even when Arbuckle wasn't honking one of its dozen assorted horns, you could practically hear the machine coming

a mile away. It was a bright fire-engine red with polished brass trimmings, and it was equipped with more lights than an airport landing-field. At night it took on the appearance of a Christmas tree in full bloom, and when its owner drove it, his identity was proclaimed to the whole world.

More than this, the car was a shining target for Hollywood's earlier petty racketeers. Like a powerful electromagnet, it seemed to attract all the decrepit jalopies in the neighborhood. Weary and time-worn flivvers, with fenders cleverly unfastened in advance, would miraculously appear in Arbuckle's path. *Crash!* To the accompaniment of shrill and anguished screams, the flivver owner would bounce out of his disabled chariot and demand immediate cash damages.

Usually there would be a shyster lawyer somewhere in the immediate offing, ready to join the argument and drop hinted threats of court action unless restitution were made at once.

Did Roscoe Arbuckle desire to be publicized as a careless driver? Did he yearn to see his name spread all

(Continued on page 96)



He was filthy rich and he lived in a penthouse all by himself and he had given golden keys to the place to five different girl-friends. Plain suicide would have been easier and neater!

By WALTON GREY

The first cop went sailing across the room into Alice's lap.



TO KILL AT LEISURE

FLADED to the ears with Don and Patricia Hutchinson's excellent Scotch, Northwest Wilke closed the door of their apartment on the party, on the rollicking noise of it. In the foyer he glanced at the indicator above the elevator doors, turned to the door labeled FIRE. The elevator was down in the lobby. No point in making the operator ride all the way up here to

the top floor just to lift one passenger one flight.

Northwest had the penthouse all to himself, with its terraces and garden and fountain, and acres of glass windows. He was going to throw all of them open and let in the night breeze. He was going to strip his body and lie on a fresh cotton sheet (he hated the feeling of silk next to his skin), and sleep raw, and let the breeze draw the flush out of himself.

The Hutchinsons were people worth knowing, but they didn't like fresh air, and even the sight of a closed window made Northwest feel stifled.

He was a human moose, big all over, big of nose and heart, not homely and not handsome, and not too filthily rich. He was not drunk, only numbly leaden in the legs; climbing the single flight of stairs was nothing, old and whiskey-soaked as he was. He flipped the fire-door open and stepped through.

On the landing there stood a girl who had been keeping watch through the door's peephole. Her lips smiled ravishingly, stopping him, and her voice murmured in a far-off, inviting way, "I've been waiting for you, Northwest."

"You can see me any time," he said gruffly. He could scarcely see her, but knew which one of the five whom he had given keys she was. Joan Donoghue. "What's on your mind?"

She extended her right fist, opened it with fingers trembling a little. Delicate long fingers whose touch he remembered. In the palm lay a gold key, in shape of a front-door key but of gold whitened and hardened with platinum. The head of the key was hinged locket, and the locket was open, and empty.

"Why didn't you wait for me upstairs?" he asked gravely.

"I think someone's up there." She took a shy step closer, brushing him with her perfume. She was a tall, slender girl, six inches shorter than his six feet two even in her high heels. She had sleepy eyes, and the marvelous, soft curves of her figure were sleepy, too.

"Broke?" he asked. She nodded

in answer and stood there expectantly, a little boldly.

Northwest drew his wallet and opened it, fingered through a compartment of crisp new banknotes. He took out a hundred, folded it again and again until it was the size of a postage stamp, crammed it into the locket-handle of the key. He snapped the lid of the locket and handed the key back.

"Darling!" She flung her arms around him and kissed him with parted lips, molding her liteness against him. She breathed, "Mmmh!" and relaxed even closer. She removed her lips and asked, "Tomorrow?"

"Call me," he advised her.

With a gently expert maneuver she was out of his loose embrace and had the door of the fire-shaft open. She paused to look at him, laughed, happy again, touched him with a swiftly-extended hand and then was gone.

A hundred bucks for a kiss this time. Expensive. But he could keep on forking over those hundreds indefinitely.

AT THE door of the penthouse he got his own key out and stuck it into the lock, turned it around. With the click he turned the knob and thrust the door open. He hesitated briefly before stepping inside.

He had forgotten to look down to see whether there was a crack of light under the door. Anyhow, he received the impression that the great living room had been lighted, and the lights were turned off simultaneously with his opening the door. Northwest entered, went back

with the door to close it and grinned in the darkness.

There was a scent of perfume in the air and he couldn't identify it in the mingled fragrance various women had left here. Funny how their scent lingered. . . . It wasn't Joan Donoghue, a n y h o w . He thought that Alice Payne and Geraldine Powers were still at the party downstairs. That left Inez Lucklen and Enid Cort, and Enid was out with his protege Gene Gordon tonight. Old Mule Gordon's kid. . . .

"Inez?" he asked.

His voice located him in the darkness, and he was attacked from the left by a man who had been behind the door. A heavy object descended on his skull. It was a glancing blow, but still enough to stun him.

He staggered forward, tripped to his knees and got up again; he swung around and struck wildly for the attacker with his powerful long arms as the lights were turned on. There were three men armed with guns which they were using as clubs. A gun chopped down on his shoulder as he doubled up one of the masked men with a terrific clout to the stomach. He raked his knuckles along the side of another's head as the blow that knocked him unconscious was delivered on his head with a gun barrel.

The man who had been walloped in the stomach got to his feet and joined the other two in the business of jumping on the semi-unconscious Wilke, kicking him in the head and face methodically and violently. The man with the ruined digestion took a stand and kicked Wilke in the stomach with all his might, and again over the heart.

They took off their handkerchief masks, which were for use only in case one of the girls or Gordon came in unexpectedly, put them back in their pockets, and switched on the light. Northwest had known all of them well, recognized them even as his consciousness flickered out. They were of a kind, well-dressed, clean-shaven men with poker faces, hard eyes. Three bright boys: mean, vicious, out for the wherewithal and ready to go to any lengths.

"The dirty welsher!" snarled one of them, thus voicing their fury at taking the walloping Northwest had given them before he was felled. He had put up a better battle than he realized, landing blows on all of them.

They searched Wilke, took his door key and the money from his wallet with the remark, "We'll just glom this for running expenses."

"Leave the change," was an order; the small bills were left in the wallet along with a one hundred note for scenery.

"Is he dead?" This from Stomach-ache.

"If he ain't, he will be after that. What the hell made you miss him when he came in?"

"The hell; the gun don't lift the same wit' these gloves on. I hit him, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you hit him. Come on; it's just one-ten, and remember it; if we're gunna fix up that punk Gordon we gotta step on it."

"How do you feel about that apple-knocker taking your girl, Frenchie?"

"Shut up!" Frenchie snapped.

"Come on! Come on!"

They put out the light, went out

and down the fire stairs, rang for the elevator. Several drunks from Hutchinson's party came out and a crowd of seven or eight or a dozen, depending on who was seeing double, went down to the street.

Back in the penthouse, Northwest rolled over and tried to stand. Couldn't. He was hemorrhaging internally; a sweet, sickening fullness was in his body.

"The dirty rats!" he groaned.
"Ah, the dirty rats!"

He hiccuped, thinking fast, painfully he fished a fountain pen from his jacket, unscrewed the cap with as much labor as though it weighed pounds; he began writing on his starched cuff.

Blood welled up in his throat, gushed, and he died with bitterness in his soul for his betrayer, the girl who loaned her gold key to the mob of rats.

IN THE living room of Enid Cort's apartment Gene Gordon watched her appreciatively as she returned from the kitchen bearing drinks. Scotch and soda. Enid had lovely teeth and softly shaped lips designed for kissing. Her smile let the teeth sparkle often. Intimacy and mischief in that smile. She sat down on the lounge beside him, against him so that he had to pass his arm about her slenderness. All of Wilke's girls were the slender kind, endowed all alike with the best curves found in nature. And since Gene was a novice at this game he did nothing to take advantage of the situation.

"Drink up!" Enid commanded, and he took a long pull of the Scotch because he was uncomfortable and

wanted it over with. She had wanted to get "slopped up" with him as she put it, and apparently Northwest had been delighted with his taking her out. Sharing the wealth and all that.

They had gone to several widely separated bars using Northwest's car, and drunk enough to float the back teeth of any one who couldn't hold it. Both of them could, Enid in particular. They had heard good singing, guffawed at a shag exhibition, seen lovely girls dance in light so subdued it was impossible to tell much about their scant costumes.

"You know, Northwest thinks it's all right for me to like you," she murmured. She was warm against him, and her perfume was in his brain.

"Mm-m-m. . . ." He was nervously noncommittal. He took another swig of the drink.

Her fingers toyed with the top stud of his shirt. She knew he wouldn't stay, and it intrigued her. She had fallen hard for young Gordon, and was responsible for his staying in New York so long. He didn't know that. Guardedly she asked, "Like the drink?"

"You make it pretty stiff." It was stiff, and sweetish. She saw the puzzled look in his eyes, held her breath while he set the drink down blindly. Her parted lips didn't smile. A naive note of alarm raised the pitch of his voice as he announced, "I'm going to pass out!"

He struggled to get up but she threw her soft weight against him. She had been a dancer, and was quite strong for such a beautiful girl.

"It's all right, darling," she said, breathing hard.

"I've got to get up and walk around!" he said anxiously. "I tell you I'm going to pass out!"

"Oh, no, no, no!" she said, and held him desperately.

Like a thunderbolt the tunnel opened up behind him, and a roaring torrent of darkness pulled him headlong into oblivion.

Of course he was going to pass out, if once she got him up to her apartment. It was Northwest's suggestion, all in good fun. Northwest had said, "No matter what I do, he'll still think of me and he won't touch you. Give him a Mickey if you have to; if you can keep him in your apartment all night, he'll figure he's compromised you and has to do the 'honorable thing.' That kid's ethical just like his old man."

Enid had taken Northwest literally, obtained a certain bluish crystalline powder, sifted the standard bartender's amount of it into the loaded Scotch in the kitchen. She pulled Gene down, stretched him out on the lounge.

"Darling, darling!" she breathed, took his face in her palms and sought his lips with a moist, long kiss. She pulled out the bow of his necktie, loosened the collar.

The door of the apartment opened the merest crack, soundlessly, and she didn't notice it. Humming, she stood erect and looked down smiling tenderly at Gene's six-foot length, at the mussed blond hair, the chiseled sleeping features. She said, "He doesn't snore. Good."

Abruptly she turned and with drunkenly graceful strides steered a course into the bedroom. This 'com-

promise' had to look good; and Gene was too big for her to drag away.

But his hundred and seventy-odd pounds weren't too much for the three men who came in with the suddenly-opened door. Catfooted and quick, they hoisted his limp weight by knees, waist and shoulders and paraded out with him, brought the door shut just as softly as it had been opened.

Out there, on the way down to the street with him Stomach-ache chortled, "If that ain't the damndest break I ever seen! She slipped him a Mickey!"

"Did you leave the key there?"

"Sure. Right on the davenport."

Back in the apartment, Enid emerged from the bedroom belting a sheer, velvet-tufted chiffon robe about her waist. When she saw the empty lounge she halted in consternation. Through forming tears she saw a glint of gold, went to the cushion and picked up one of the gold keys. At once she took her evening bag from a table, hunted through it and found that the key Northwest had given her was gone. So. What Gene had done amounted to calling her a name, just to show her that he was too smart for her. She stamped her slippers feet. Thereafter she paced the room until she was nearly sober, smoking cigarettes in a chain, scheming, angry.

THE blast of a taxi-horn a couple of yards from his ear woke Gene up. He ached all over; his head ached with banging throbs, and his tongue tasted like the bottom of a birdcage. He straightened up. He

was in Northwest's car, around the corner from the hotel, and there was a dent in his forehead from leaning against the window crank. He gave himself a look in the rear-vision mirror and goggled. His cheek was split, his lips were puffed, and a gorgeous purple mouse sat alongside his right eye.

Flaubergasted, he buttoned his collar, fumbled his tie into a lopsided bow. With his collar up and topcoat snug to conceal the rouge-stains on his shirt, hat tugged down, he headed for the hotel around the corner to raise Ned with Northwest about the hellcat in his harem.

That was a hell of a thing for a girl to do, hop a man when he was out cold. What was more, she had given him a Mickey; he knew how much liquor he could hold, and he had never passed out before in his life. When he made his usual perfunctory knock on the penthouse door, he was boiling.

He jabbed his key into the lock, opened the door and stepped inside. And then he closed the door gently behind himself and drawled, "Well!"

The place was full of people—all the girls including Enid, several men in plain clothes, a couple of uniformed cops. A short man with stony gray eyes asked, "Won't you come in?"

"What's all this?" Gene asked suspiciously.

"What's your name?" the detective asked.

"Eugene Gordon. What's yours?"

"Wallace Bundy. Where've you been?"

"What's it all about, Inspector?" Then a stain in the rug drew his

gaze and his face blanched. His eyes searched Bundy's.

"No, he's not there any more, and don't pull that inspector stuff." Bundy's lips scarcely moved when he talked.

"What do you mean?"

"Wilke died from that beating you gave him."

"That I gave him! You're out of your mind! I wasn't here last night."

"That's what you've got to prove, Mister. How did your face get bunged up that way?"

"I don't know. I must have been hijacked."

"I can tell a murderer when I see one. You and Wilke had a quarrel about something and you knocked him cold, and went nuts and kicked him to death."

"You're a liar!" Gene snapped. His face was congested.

Bundy reached out and whacked Gene across the face with a heavy hand. Simultaneously Gene started his fist from his hip, and it made a sound like the flat of a cleaver whacking juicy steak when it hit Bundy's jaw. Bundy flung his arms out and piled into the chair where Alice Payne was sitting. She was a beautifully tailored girl, looking like a model on a day off. Her chair went over, she screamed, and the sleeve-ing-up of her skirt gave the population an unforgettable view.

A six-foot cop named Averill jumped Gene from behind and fell on him like a mountain. Gene hooked his arms over his head as he went to his knees, and majestically the mountain soared over his head into the sofa where Joan Donoghue was sitting with Inez Lucklen.



Putting Enid behind him,
he started backing up.

Their silken legs gleamed as they jumped out of the way.

Averill came right back, and Gene met him, both slugging. On hands

and knees Bundy shook his head and muttered, "I should have known better than that."

The other detectives were standing with arms akimbo, just grinning, because Averill had something o' a reputation as a fighter, and besides that they all knew that North-

west Wilke had been a good guy. The other cop shifted his feet uncertainly.

Detective-sergeant Bundy—he wasn't inspector—charged and knocked Averill sprawling with a solid blow to the cheek.

"Cut it out!" he barked at Gene. And glared at him.

"Well, who started it?" Gene demanded furiously.

Thunderstruck at having his own side turn on him, Averill got off the floor and stood with his mouth open, rubbing his cheekbone.

BUNDY looked around the room, nodded to a man and said, "Beat it, Foote. We'll call you."

That was George Foote, a shifty-eyed man with unhealthy skin, the elevator operator who had been on duty last night. He went out, blinking as though he hadn't had much sleep.

One of the detectives called Gene's apartment and told the department man waiting there that Gene had showed up at Northwest's.

Bundy asked with a trace of irony, "You don't mind if I see what you've got in your pockets, do you?"

"Go head," said Gene.

Bundy went through his wallet, went through all his pockets while Gene stood rigid with resentment. The detective jerked his fingers back out of a waistcoat pocket, gingerly dipped in again and fished out the big sterling turnip Gene's father had given him. Bundy had pricked himself on broken glass. The watch-crystal was broken, as though Gene had taken a blow there, the movement was stopped, and the blued-steel hands pointed to one-ten.

"How about it, Yoerg?" Bundy asked. "How does one-ten sound?"

"The M.E. said he croaked around one o'clock," Yoerg affirmed.

Bundy put the watch back in Gene's pocket and ordered him to take off the waistcoat. Gene complied, grim; Bundy wrapped the waistcoat up on itself meticulously and gave it to Yoerg, saying something that Gene didn't overhear. Yoerg nodded and went out.

"What time did you say he left your place?" Bundy asked Enid.

"I told you I don't know," she answered almost inaudibly, looking at the floor or her knees. The other girls smiled. "Some time after midnight."

"Half-past?"

"I don't know. We weren't paying any attention."

The other girls exchanged looks, knowing.

"One o'clock?" Bundy persisted.
"Two?"

Enid shook her head. She didn't know. She raised her head and she and Gene exchanged a long look. She couldn't help it if she didn't know.

"What time would you say you left her place?" Bundy asked Gene.

"I haven't got the faintest idea," he answered. "Some time after midnight."

Bundy shrugged and picked up a blood-stained cuff which had been cut from a dress shirt, showed it to Gene. In ink, blurred but legible, was written, "Gene did—"

"He didn't finish writing," Gene said.

"I guess he didn't," said Bundy.

"That's the word," Gene agreed.
"Didn't."

"How many keys did Northwest have?"

"Seven," Gene answered promptly, and Bundy nodded. There were the five gold keys he had given out to the girls, his own key, and the spare he had given Gene.

Bundy mentioned thoughtfully, "Northwest's key is missing." What he meant was that there was no way of getting into the penthouse except with one of the seven keys. They were all accounted for now except Northwest's own. If Gene was the murderer, he might have snatched the missing key just to establish a red herring, and boldly returning to the scene of the crime was either colossally stupid or wonderfully clever.

BUNDY looked around at the gallery of lovely girls, antagonism in his cold eyes. One of them, he felt sure, might just as well as Gene be responsible for Wilke's death. Suppose one of them had given her key to a man who hated Northwest. There was Joan Donoghue, the sleepy one, sitting in an easy chair now with her knees tight together, showing with a gleam of light on the round of each knee. Sunlight hit her beautifully rounded calves.

Enid Cort, the one with the ravishing smile, the smile that had vanished the moment she had arrived.

Inez Lucklen, another superb specimen. She wore sticky crimson lipstick, and the shape of her lips was sullen. She smoked constantly, made up her lips constantly, and left stains like gore on her cigarette butts.

Geraldine Powers, posing, always posing. Profile like a Hollywood

star, forever looking down her dainty nose as though she had ten millions or else the genius of Duse behind her. Legs, also. Wilke had been a connoisseur of legs.

Alice Payne, the tailored one. Even her lovely face looked as though it had been made to order. Like the others, she was dressed to exhibit her physical perfection to best advantage.

Five perfect pairs of limbs, three crossed from right to left, two from left to right. Inez was swinging a silken leg with sullen impatience. Five hearts beating fast, all of them breathing faster than normal. All of them had arrived promptly when summoned, and all had registered shock convincingly when they learned that Northwest was dead. Looking them over, Bundy appreciated to what extent Wilke had gone in for the luxuries of the earth.

They returned his scrutiny with defiance. Enid smiled, Geraldine posed. Personalities, slaves to their artificiality, parasites. Limbs, silkiness. Bundy's voice was a whip-crack—"Clear out! But don't make it too hard for us to find you when we want you."

They got up gracefully from their various locations like models in a fashion show, stalled uncertainly; they moved to the door as the cop opened it, and went out with an odd erectness, as though they expected to get hit from behind. Bundy kept a sardonic eye on the legs until they disappeared. Legs contained in glistening silk as sheer as cobweb.

"I'll take Gordon in," he told the detectives, dismissing the detectives after the girls. To the cops: "You two stay here."

He started out with Gordon, when the phone rang. He went back to answer it, barked a hello into the mouthpiece and listened. He asked, "Who's calling? Oh. No. He's dead."

A blunt man, Bundy.

In the brief conversation following he explained the circumstances to the caller, and at length offered the handpiece to Gene. "Maybe you know something about it," he said. "It's Northwest's lawyer. Hans Van Dergroot."

Gene took the phone, said, "Hello," listened. Something about a lawsuit. It wouldn't be the first time that Wilke had been sued; Gene said, "No, he never told me anything about it. It's no business of mine."

Then he ejaculated, "What?"

When he hung up, he said to Bundy, "It's something about a lawsuit. Van Dergroot said Wilke's will leaves everything to me, and that I've got to go up and see him."

"You come along with me," Bundy ordered.

They took the elevator down to the street and got into Bundy's car, a black sedan of standard make. Bundy announced: "We'll go to your place."

Gene said, "I thought we were going to Headquarters."

"Don't you tell me my business," said Bundy. "I never did like wearing a monkey suit and I can't stand to see a guy in one. You're going to take a bath and change your clothes."

After a block or two Gene asked, "Think I did it?"

"Did you ever kill anybody?" Bundy countered.

"No."

"I've seen a lot of guys who committed murder," said Bundy, "and you've got that kind of eyes. That's all."

"I didn't do it," Gene said flatly, "and you know damned well I didn't do it."

He decided not to tell Bundy about the Mickey Enid had given him.

"All I know is that this thing is so damned open-and-shut that it's fishy," said Bundy. "Here I go shooting off my mouth."

Gene said, "Somebody got hold of a key."

"You get plastered with that Cort girl, and you don't know what time it is. Then you show up with a hang-over with a busted watch, stopped at the time of the murder. Everybody's got an alibi but you," Bundy said bitterly.

Gene told him about finding himself in the car he had borrowed from Northwest. He stated that he had no memory of driving away from Enid's.

"You're just making it worse," said Bundy.

AT Gene's, Bundy morosely ordered Gordon to strip and take a bath and change. While Gene showered, the detective stood in the doorway and watched the process of soaping and scrubbing with silent interest.

Besides the discolorations on his face there were bruises on Gene's chest, midriff and hip, not counting a rainbow-hued mark on the shin.

"I got the bruise on my shin from banging into a chair here in the dark last week," Gene said.

"You go around in the dark too much," said Bundy.

While Gene was drying himself and getting changed into fresh clothes, the detective asked, "You know about these keys?" He had the five gold keys in his hand, jingled them. On all of them the lockets were empty.

"Northwest gave them out," Gene said quietly, buttoning on his shorts. "He used hundred-dollar bills. If one of the girls needed money, she could let herself into his apartment and dicker with him about getting the locket filled again."

"One thing in your favor is that the Donoghue girl got a hundred from him last night. She saw a light under Wilke's door and waited for him in the fire-exit by Hutchinson's. She said she didn't see you come up, and neither did the elevator kid, Foote."

"I wasn't up."

"What's the set-up? I mean, what's your racket?"

"Mining," said Gene. "Abandoned mines. My father and Wilke were partners a long while back, and I came to New York to see whether I could get some financial backing. The mines I've got are no good, but I've worked out a fairly efficient method of salvaging metal in paying quantities from the old ore dumps."

"Gold?" Bundy asked.

"Gold. I told Northwest about my process, and he seemed to be interested, but he's kept on putting me off. Said he wanted me to have a 'good time' before we talked business and I went back."

"You really got something?"

"Of course I've got something. All I need is some machinery, and

money to buy it with." Gene shrugged into his vest and jacket, buttoned up and asked, "How about that watch?"

"It's almost too good to be true. Maybe somebody's framing you, but look at my angle. It's phony both ways. I can hardly believe anybody'd go to all the trouble these guys did to hang a killing on somebody else. Everything is pat either way."

"These guys?" Gene asked.

"You're pretty big," said Bundy. "It'd take more than one."

"I suppose Northwest had enemies like anyone else."

"Enemies and bloodsuckers. He was a great guy, but he was a fool for women and gambling and he lost both ways. Just the same he was a great guy."

"I know he was," said Gene.

The telephone rang; Bundy started for it, said, "You take it."

GENE lifted the handpiece and held it so that Bundy could listen in. It was the elevator operator, Foote.

"What's on your mind?" Gene asked.

"Listen," Foote recited, "I had a hangover when them lousy cops was asking questions of me, and I couldn't think right. But I told them I didn't take you up or down from Wilke's apartment last night, so am I your pal or am I?"

"I'm listening."

"I've got some dope that I just thought of, and maybe it's worth something to you. Know what I mean?"

"I'll pay you what it's worth."

"That's good enough for me. Look. Last night I took three guys

up to the roof, three guys, see? I just thought they were bound for that party of Hutchinson's. Along after one o'clock I brought those birds down again with a bunch of souses. Only those three guys weren't drunk. *They weren't drunk*, understand? I've been thinking it was funny everybody else was tanked except them. Is that worth something?"

"You bet it is. Can you describe those men?"

"I sure as hell— Hey!" Foote ejaculated. Then it was a scream, "Don't! Wait a minute!"

THE muffled roar of a shot sounded, followed by a crash as Foote dropped the handpiece. Detective-Sergeant Bundy catapulted himself in a bee-line for the door of the apartment, snatched the door open and took the stairs in a reckless, plunging descent. Gene jumped up to follow him and was halfway to the door when the phone rang again. He hesitated, returned to answer it. This time it was Enid Cort.

Her voice was strained. "Gene? Can you come up to my place right away?"

"What's it about?"

"I didn't have a chance to talk to you at—at Northwest's. It's about my gold key. I always keep it, kept it, in my purse, but last night I found it on the lounge when you were gone. You didn't put it there, did you?"

"Of course not."

"Then someone stole it from me and returned it, and I know who it was. I think. Can you come up?"

"Right away."

But after hanging up he looked through the directory for Foote's address. He'd go there first.

ON THE way up in a hack he thought of Foote's "three guys," and the same number of plaintiffs reported by Van Dergroot to be suing Wilke. There wasn't any connection. The three men, John Isotto, Merle Chabrun, and Roy Nichols, were suing Wilke for quite a hunk of money. There had been a poker game, and the men held Northwest's I.O.U.'s for two hundred and forty thousand dollars. Some jackpot. Their letter threatening suit had been mailed five days ago, and Van Dergroot had just returned from business out of town.

Bundy had picked up a squad car on his way to Foote's, had left the uniformed men in charge and was already leaving when Gene arrived. The elevator man had been shot through the forehead and killed instantly.

"This lets you out," Bundy said, and showed Gene a brass key he had taken from the dead man. Wilke's door key. "They planted it on him; that means there's a girl back of this. They used her key, and tried to cover her by making it look as though they used Wilke's."

Gene asked at random, "Ever hear of three gamblers named Isotto, Chabrun, and Nichols?"

"John the Bug Isotto, Frenchie Chabrun, and King Nichols," said Bundy. "Why?"

"That's what Van Dergroot called about," Gene explained. "Their lawyer sent him a letter threatening suit a few days ago, but he was out of town and just got back."

Bundy stared for a minute, asked abruptly, "Want a ride down to Headquarters?"



The mickey dropped from his hand. "Thank God, he doesn't snore," she thought.

"No, thanks."

When Bundy drove off, Gene took a hack to Enid's.

THERE was no answer to his ring, so he punched bells at random in

the foyer until someone pressed the buzzer and he could open the door. Just as he reached the hall inside, Enid arrived at the bottom of the steps with a slim young fellow Gene had never seen before. He had a

good, tight grip on her arm just below the armpit, and she was pleading, "Frenchie, don't! You're hurting me!"

Her face was very white in the shadow of the hall.

Frenchie let go very abruptly when he saw Gene coming on, made a snaky grab for a gun in a shoulder holster. In the split instant before he could draw Gene delivered the Sunday punch with which he had floored Bundy. Frenchie hit the carpeted steps and bounced like rubber. His outflung arm struck Enid when he went down, and she staggered into Gene. She held on tight with the resilience of her young form against him, trembling. And she had to tell him right away, sobbing, why she had given him the Mickey last night.

"All right," he ordered, "let's get out of here before any more of these birds show up."

The door check was still bringing the door shut sluggishly when it was heaved open again and Nichols barged in with Isotto. Nichols commanded softly, "Hold it, sweetheart."

Both men held guns; Chabrun was still draped unconscious on the steps. Gene put Enid behind him and started backing, hoping to get a chance to snatch up Chabrun's gun. He said, "Come and get us."

"We'll do that little thing."

The door behind the gangsters was kicked violently open again and Bundy stood there with a young cannon in his fist.

"I just happened to think," he said grimly, "that Frenchie used to be Enid's boy-friend, and that you three geniuses might be keeping an

eye on her the way you were on the elevator kid."

AFTER the men had been booked Bundy paid Gene a social call at his small apartment and turned his property over to him, including the five gold keys.

"Here's a funny one," he chuckled. "I had one of the men stick the pieces of your watch crystal together, and there was a piece missing. When those wise guys set your watch back and broke it to frame you, the missing piece bounced into Isotto's hanky pocket, and the boys found it in the frisking."

"They certainly went to a lot of trouble."

"They thought they had something, but they're just cheap gamblers. That big poker game was crooked, and they knew Northwest wouldn't pay those I.O.U.'s, so they figured the way to cash them was sue.

"Enid Cort and Chabrun used to be a dance team, but he was a louse and she quit. Just a few days ago he got her to meet him for cocktails, and swiped her key. That's the way it worked. Those master-minds even robbed Wilke, and they had money on them with serial numbers that checked with the bill he gave the Donoghue girl."

"Northwest was a swell guy."

"He was a good loser. By the way, a couple of the girls have called up already and asked for their keys back, but I suppose you'll be going west, eh?"

"Maybe not right away."

"If digging for gold is your business," Bundy suggested, "you might just as well stick around; there's plenty of it going on right here."

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IN THE MICROSCOPE

(Continued from page 61)

sold it in Novato, California, who stated that he had made three such sales in the vicinity. Detectives then discovered that one of the three purchasers lived adjoining a farm that matched Dr. Schneider's description completely! The farmer was innocent, though, for it developed that the explosive had been stolen from him by two former Italian employees. They were the ones who had attempted to murder a man by bombing.

Professor Edward O. Heinrich, chemist and criminologist of the University of California, is the second great expert in this field. It was

Prof. Heinrich who did yeoman work in solving the famous D'Autremont train robbery—wherein, by microscopic examination of a pair of overalls left behind by one of the robbers, he determined that the criminal was a blond man about twenty-five, of rather fastidious habits. These facts were assumed from certain small hairs in the overalls, which indicated the wearer's approximate age, and from narrow, clean nail-parings which proved the wearer to be careful of his appearance. All of which was borne out by the facts when the criminal was finally caught.

HOLLYWOOD CHISELRY

(Continued from page 79)

over the headlines as a speed demon who drove around crushing innocent little tin Lizzies into so much junk? He did not! He preferred to dig into his capacious pocket and pay off.

The late and gallant western star, Tom Mix, was another devotee of flashy automobiles. One of his spectacular cars even had his name lettered on it in gold paint, and his ultimate death was a result of a highway accident in a super-powered car. How much money Mix paid to settle fake accident claims was never known; but if he had as many unpleasant experiences as Roscoe Arbuckle, the sum total must have been staggering.

And in no case was the cowboy star at fault.

The Hollywood bunco detail has long since learned to be alert to such tricks, and the present trend is for the star to depend on police assistance to place the blame where it rightfully belongs. In fact, there is one virile masculine star who has a fighting reputation that has taught the underworld many a needed lesson.

That star is Victor McLaglen, two-fisted actor famous for his hard-boiled portrayals on the screen. When some hopeful grafter threatens to sue McLaglen on a fake claim, the crook is advised to go right ahead and try it. In his Hollywood years, it has been estimated that McLaglen has beaten nearly a quarter of a million dollars' worth of phony damage suits.



"Don't you touch me, you black-mailer!" she said.

ON WITH THE KILL

By PAUL
HANNA

BY TEN o'clock I was dismally looking for Ritchie, so I could tell him to check me out. Me, I am a plain old-fashioned guy and I hate frills. Guys that

wear monocles and red ribbons across their hard shirts, and old pouter pigeon dames that use lorgnettes, all of them gripe me to death. To say nothing of these hoity-toity ah!-ah!-mustn't-touch debutantes

that swagger like a queen of burley-cue and then turn on the old frigid eye if a guy makes a move toward them.

So I stood in the doorway that led to the *patio* and looked back once more, searching the crowd for Ritchie. There was the host, Colonel Zachary Taylor Townsend, looking like the guy on the front of *Esquire*, the ever present glass in his hand. He had about a half dozen of his yes-men gathered around him and from the color his nose was turning, I figured he was enjoying himself. And over to the other side his second wife, Charlotte Townsend, was enjoying her moment of triumph.

When it came to dress—undress is the better word—Mrs. Townsend didn't yield an inch to the silly debutantes. If anything, her evening gown was lower in the front, possessed less back, and was tighter around her hips. Not that I squawked about that.

Not too many years ago little Charlotte had strutted for Ziegfeld with a feather fan. And she was putting it on tonight!

You see, even though she was an ex-show girl, the fact that she had married the colonel, God help him, made her tops in this thing called society. She was high dog in the meat house and not only knew it herself, but wanted everyone else to know it.

Well, Ritchie wasn't in the room, damn him. I strolled out onto the flags of the *patio*. There was a couple necking over in one corner, but Richie wasn't there. Ritchie was the colonel's bodyguard, trainer, companion and what not. He had

an easy berth. He'd called me and asked me to come out because he claimed he was afraid somebody would try to lift some of the ice floating around at a big party like that.

But hell, I'd recognized six or seven boys, private operators like me, and I hold myself above such ordinary snoopers. I'm a murder man, a big shot in my line. And it gripped me to think Ritchie, even if he was an old friend, would ring me into the same line-up.

He wasn't in the garden, either, as far as I could see. I'd just about decided to get my hat and go home when I turned on the graveled path and happened to notice this pergola, or summerhouse. I was maybe fifty feet away, looking right into the blacker patch that was the door. I could see the red eye of a glowing cigarette. Maybe this was Ritchie.

The cigarette eye made a sweeping arc as the smoker flipped it. Right away I knew it wasn't Ritchie. I could smell the difference! Then a voice said, "Darling, darling! I've been waiting fifteen minutes!" A pair of soft arms went around my neck.

I tried to dodge, but only for a minute. As soon as I saw there was no chance of breaking the clutch I helped tighten it. What if I couldn't see her? I could feel her hair in my face and her parted lips searching for mine in the darkness. And when I kissed her she trembled against me. It was swell! Right then I hoped I never saw old Ritchie again!

She pulled me down on the stone bench beside her without even taking her lips from mine, and I didn't mind that either.

There was a moon outside, but inside the pergola there was only darkness, not black, but thick and dim.

"Darling, darling!"

Hell, was that all she could say? Evidently it wasn't, for half laughing, half moaning, she asked for a smoke.

I dug one out of my pocket, she put it in her mouth, I flipped my lighter. The light glowed on a pair of startled blue eyes that widened as they gazed at me.

"You—you—you!" she gasped and leaped up. I didn't feel so good. She said, "You beast! Who are you?"

spat. I might not have noticed it except for the duller, fuller boom that followed, and the sudden glow of light that lit up the garden back there where I had come from.

The neckers in the corner of the patio didn't seem to notice. No one came running out of the house to see what was what. So I went back the way I had come, risking another cussing. I am a curious guy. It pays in my business.

The girl was there. I could hear her breathing before I made out the dim blotch of her dress huddled in the pathway just outside the door of the pergola. And there was a darker

The photograph showed the girl bending over Eddie's body, but somehow the facts didn't quite jibe with the picture. According to the police, Eddie hadn't been a nice guy, and there must be other ways to account for his killing

I said, "Me? Hell, I'm Walsh. Who are you?"

I NEVER got around to finding out. I have been cussed from Alaska to Cape Town, but this dame did the biggest, most complete job. Believe me, I turned around and stumbled out of that pergola and back the way I had come. And I didn't stop until I was on the edge of the patio.

I remember wiping the lipstick off my face with my handkerchief, I remember grinning and thinking it wasn't such a bad party after all. And then it happened.

It wasn't loud. Just a little slap, a

shape at her feet, too, a darker shape that didn't move.

"He's dead, he's dead," she moaned.

I used my lighter.

He was dead all right, all right, as dead as hell. There was a small, neat hole right between his eyes. Not much blood leaking out, the hole was too little, but it meant death.

In the flare of the lighter I saw the gun. The girl was holding it in her hand, down at her side. She saw me looking, dropped it like it was hot and said, "No! My God, no! I didn't kill him, I loved him!"

I remember standing up then and listening, waiting to see who'd come

from the house. And no one came. Now, you ask, how did I happen to believe the dame right off the bat when I'd caught her with the gun in her hand?

I believed her because the bullet that killed the guy wasn't fired from a close distance at all. There wasn't any reddened flesh, no powder burns; just a neat hole. And besides, maybe I was influenced just a little. Don't forget, this was the babe I'd held in my arms.

"Tell me what happened," I snapped, "and hurry up about it."

"I met him here," she sobbed, "and we—we—talked for a minute. Then all at once the shot came and Eddie fell! Something hit me—see!" I flipped the lighter again.

She pulled back the shoulder of her dress. It was already turning blue. She went on. "Hit me and thudded down beside Eddie. I picked it up—it was the gun—and leaned over him, and then there was an explosion and everything lit up and—"

I stopped her. Pretty, wasn't it? It didn't take a master mind to see what had happened. The guy had been shot, the gun had doubtlessly been wiped clean and tossed at the fool girl. She'd picked it up—leaving her prints—and while she leaned over the murdered man, someone took a flashlight picture!

"Who's the guy?" Maybe my voice was a little harsh, for she stiffened against me. "Come on," I snapped. "Who is he, a guest?"

"Eddie Sands," she whispered. "He wasn't a guest. He was the chauffeur."

I slapped her to make her quit sobbing. "And you, sister, come on now. Who are you, a maid?"

"I'm Beth Townsend."

Whew! The colonel's charming daughter!

THE rest happened pretty fast. Maybe I did wrong. But it worked out all right so there was nothing said. I took the girl back to the house, made her go to her room, and made her promise to keep her mouth shut. The guy was dead, taking the rap for a killing she didn't do wouldn't help any at all.

And when I hunted up Ritchie I didn't mention her name. I just told him I'd gone out for a smoke and found the body. Funny thing to do, wasn't it? So in case any of you get to thinking I was playing Galahad, I'll tell you this. It was a perfect blackmail set-up. And I figured when the blackmailer made his move, the girl would come to me. Catch on? Hell, a fee is a fee!

So they buried Eddie Sands, the Townsend chauffeur, and I waited two weeks for the girl to come to me. She didn't.

And every time I called the house or wrote her—there was no response. I was burning up. Hell, I'd saved her from a grueling investigation and a lot of publicity. I deserved something. I might have figured the flashlight picture was all a figment of my imagination except for one thing. I looked up this Eddie Sands.

Eddie Sands, according to the police, wasn't a very nice guy. He'd been in plenty of trouble over dames, mostly old second-childhood dames, before. His picture showed him to be one of those dark, wavy-haired gigolos whose real name was probably Luigi something or other. He'd been working there at the Townsend

house for three or four months, before he was bumped off.

So, to a suspicious operator like me, it stunk. It rather looked like Sands had made a play for the Townsend girl and been killed for his pains. Could he have been crossed by his own pals? Could they have killed him and tossed the gun to make the thing look better, to have more on the girl?

That's all I had when I got my visitor from the Townsend family. And it wasn't Beth. It was the step-mother Charlotte.

She breezed into the office and looked around like the joint was a sewer and I was a nice dirty sewer rat. If she hadn't have had a lorgnette in one hand, a purse in the other, she'd have held her nose. Me, I kicked her a chair and said, "Sit down, babe, I knew you when."

She placed the purse on the desk, swaggered across the room to the other chair and sat down with a flourish of silken legs. Evidently she saw the high and mighty air wouldn't work with me and decided to come down to my level. She said, "Long time no see, Joe. How's tricks?"

"Rotten," I admitted. "Just what, my dear, brings you to me?"

She said, "Open the purse, Joe, and look at the pretty picture."

I opened the purse and took out the yellow envelope. I took out the picture. Then I put it back in the envelope, the envelope back in the purse, and closed the purse. It was a picture of Beth Townsend, gun in hand, bending over the inert figure of Eddie Sands. Her hair was tousled, she had a wild look in her eyes. Which was only natural.

I waited.

Charlotte Townsend said, "Count me in, Joe."

"Maybe," I told her, "one of us is nuts. What is this all about?"

"Quit stalling," she snapped. "Beth told me all about it. Hell, I've been lending her money to pay you with. But now I'm about broke, and if she's too dumb to see through the thing, I'm not! I'm not asking you to take the heat off the girl. I'm all for you. Townsend has got plenty. But I want a cut!"

UNDER cover of pouring a drink for the two of us I thought of a hell of a lot of things. So, the kid had been paying off already and hadn't come to me as she'd promised. Instead she'd gone to her step-mother to borrow pay-off money. And here was Charlotte, the step-mother, thinking I was the—

"How much has she paid out?"

"You ought to know. She got four thousand from me one time, three the next, and now she wants more. She'll have to go to her father."

"Where's the fifty grand he settled on you when you married him?"

She shrugged. "What's the difference? It's gone. Now I'm counting myself in on this racket you're pulling on the kid."

"And if I see it otherwise? What if I told you I wasn't pulling any racket, that I hadn't seen or talked to the kid since the night Sands died?"

She got up and walked toward me, took her drink, tossed it off and sat down on the edge of the desk before me. One silken leg dangled free, the other was on the floor. Charlotte carried her years well.

"Get this straight," she said. "I married the tightest guy in the world. He's a phony, the good colonel, my husband, and my biggest ambition is to make him pay, and pay, and pay. Beth came to me last week and told me the whole story. I loaned her money to pay off. She came again early this week. I did the same. Not because I liked the little fool, understand, but because it gave me a chance to find the blackmailer. This week, after she made contact, I traced the man that picked

up the envelope. He came to your office!"

I said, "Nuts. He might have come to this building. He didn't come to this office."

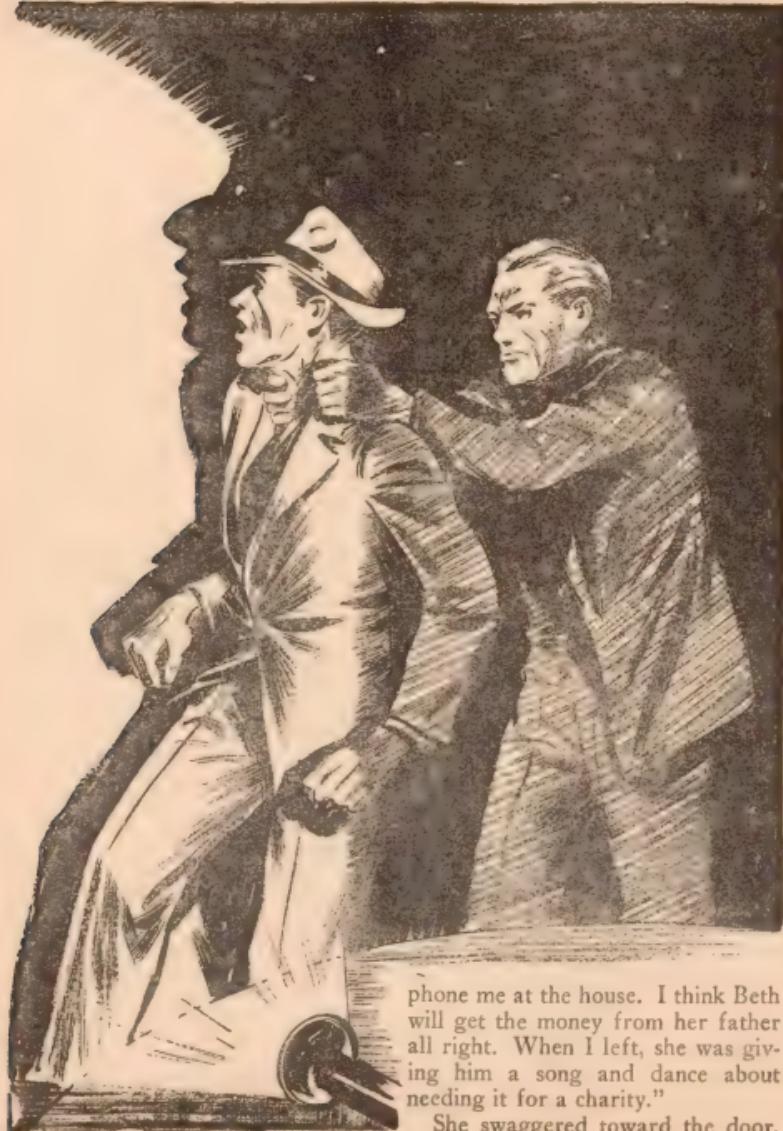
"I can be pretty nice, Joe," she said, "when I want to be, or I can be pretty ugly. Suppose I told the police about you and Beth discovering the body together. Suppose I told them about her being blackmailed, about her paying off, about the guy coming to this building. Stinko! You're through, for covering up a murder suspect. Maybe she *did* kill Sands."

I stood up, pretty disgusted. She

The light of the flash showed, outlined, the dame against the wall, in a veritable panic of terror.



put her arms around my neck and pressed close. "Count me in, darling," she murmured, "or little Charlotte talks long and loud. You can



phone me at the house. I think Beth will get the money from her father all right. When I left, she was giving him a song and dance about needing it for a charity."

She swaggered toward the door,

her hips liquid and insulting. It was like she'd thumbed her nose at me. She opened the door. A guy says, "Excuse it, please!" It was Jim Swanson, of Homicide.

When he stepped aside to let the lady pass, I saw Tommy Ritchie standing behind him. Ritchie nodded to Charlotte.

A LOT of people in the last ten years have learned not to like me and my methods. The one who had learned the lesson most thoroughly was Jim Swanson. Not that he had anything on me, and not that he was the type of guy that lets his dislikes run away with his common sense.

I believe Jim respects me, just as I respect him. For ability, at least. Jim was too suave and easy going—apparently to suit me. He was tall and dressed like a clothes horse and always had a sunny smile no matter what happened. He always grinned at the men he shot—and he'd killed several in line of duty.

No need to go into the interview between the three of us. Jim Swanson kept smiling, Ritchie kept frowning and sucking on a dead pipe, and I kept talking.

Over and over I told the story of finding Eddie Sands' body beside the pergola. No, I couldn't explain why the killer had wiped the gun and tossed it beside the body. No, I had no idea who else could have been around, what other woman. So, naturally I couldn't explain the prints of the spike heels, or the fact that a dainty lace handkerchief had been found beneath the body. Yes, I knew the gun was one of Colonel Townsend's own Arminius Match pistols,

but anyone could have lifted it from its case.

So pretty soon Swanson said, "Well, Joe, I was just checking back over some of the details. Personally, I'd vote a reward to whoever killed Sands. He was a rat, a louse. We're sort of hampered in our investigations, due to the colonel's political affiliations, but I promise you this, I'll find out all about it." And the way he grinned sent cold chills through me. The door closed behind him.

Ritchie, who had waited, said gloomily. "The only prints left on that target pistol were latent prints on the barrel. They belonged to the colonel."

He looked at me sharply, nodded his head unhappily when he saw what I was apparently thinking. "Yeah, the fact that the killer used a single shot target pistol proves he was sure of his marksmanship. The colonel is state champion."

"And why would the colonel blast Eddie Sands?"

Ritchie got up, put the pipe in his pocket. "We ought to come out in the open, Joe. Hell, the dead man had lipstick smeared all over him.. He'd been out there with a dame. He got caught, that's all. You and me, Joe, we know who the dame was."

The phone rang. I answered it. I said, "Who? Oh, yes." Then I listened a little bit and I guess my face went a little white. But I bit down on my tongue and cracked back, "All right, whatever you say. Sometime after dinner."

Ritchie's brows asked a question. I said, "Your boss, the colonel. He wants me to come out after dinner

tonight. Wouldn't say what he wanted." Ritchie wasn't any too well pleased. Nor was I. So I went to lunch, had a little Scotch on rye and tried to figure it out.

All right, I told myself, covering up for the snooty little dame had been a mistake in the first place. She could have been playing around with Sands, had a fuss with him and burned him. Where had she carried the gun? I knew damned well it wasn't on her! But it could have been on the bench in the pergola. If that was true she might have shot me, myself, there in the darkness!

I had another drink. That one cleared things. I still didn't think she'd shot him because that boom and the flash had been like calcium. I know flash reports when I hear them and see them. If she shot him, who took the picture?

But, leaving all that out as something already done, who was putting the screws on Beth Townsend, why was Charlotte Townsend so sure it was me, what was Jim Swanson inquiring around for, with that big, boyish smile of his, and just what did Colonel Zachary Taylor Townsend want with me?

BACK at the office I took the Out to Lunch sign off the door and went on it. I thought it was odd that the mail was on my desk, for the postman always sticks it through the door slot when I'm out, even though the door is unlocked. I sat down and leafed through it absently, lit a cigarette. Then hearing the creak of the closet door behind me I wheeled—and grinned.

Beth Townsend stepped out of the closet with a gun in her hand and her

face desperately white. The gun pointed every place but at me and I could damned near hear her teeth trembling and chattering. She was hatless and her hair was a golden tumble about her head. A long, yellow slicker, a man's slicker, went from slender shoulders to her round ankles. I got up. She said, "Don't you touch me, you blackmailer, I've come to kill you!"

So I reached out and took the gun out of her hand and put it in my pocket. She swayed on her feet, caught the edge of the desk, then let loose and dropped. Me, I jumped for water. Returning, I saw the slicker had come open. I drank the water myself.

Beneath the slicker she wore nothing but a pair of pajamas. The trousers were rolled up to her knees, cloudy and wispy. I went back and got another glass of water, drank it too.

And finally I got her in the other chair, chafed her wrists a little and brought her around.

She didn't bother about the coat. I had to close it myself. I stuttered, "Now, Miss Townsend, just what are you doing here in this ridiculous garb, and why did you try to shoot me? Especially with the safety on."

It took a little while, but the story got out. Seems she'd sort of liked the Sands monkey. He'd been up to his old tricks. After his death, she confessed to her father that she'd played around with the mug, and the old gent had hit the ceiling. His daughter fooling around with commoners!

Consequently he kept her in the house, and when my calls and letters came, she couldn't get out to come to

me. As a matter of fact the old colonel had a suspicion that she had likewise fallen for me, a common dick. He had a swell opinion of his daughter.

"Okay," I told her, "then you sneaked out and came here with a gun."

She nodded. She said, "You said to meet you tonight with the third payment, and I haven't got it. I thought I'd beat you to it."

"What makes you think I'm the guy blackmailing you, babe? Who told you that?"

She shook her head stubbornly. "It has to be you. You caught me there with the murder gun, the body at my feet. You got there first. How do I know but what you took that awful picture, then came running to me."

And she began to cry. All right, I'm a sucker. I watched her for a minute and all I could feel was sorry for her. She'd been in love with the monkey and she'd lost him. Somebody was putting the screws to her and I hate blackmail. Her own stepmother was oozing around perfectly willing to do her more dirt.

I said, "Listen, where did I tell you to bring the rest of the money tonight, and how much was it?"

She looked in the pockets of her coat, shook her head. "Maybe I didn't bring the letter. You said to put it at the usual place out by the river lodge, and you said to bring the rest of it, the whole amount. I've paid you seven thousand, so that means eight—"

I shook her. I managed to say, "Babe, I didn't get any of your money. I don't know who's blackmailing you, but I'm going to find

out.. Your old man has invited me out to your place tonight for some reason or other. I'll be there. You'll put that jack where he says to put it and I'll get the monkey that comes for it. We'll finish this up tonight!"

SOMEHOW my arm was about her shoulders, and she felt so little and shaky there that I pulled her closer and closer. From down in the region of my chest I heard her voice. "I don't know why you do this! I haven't any money! I haven't anything at all!"

Not much she didn't!

Hell, I know why I did it. I was thinking of that night in the pergola when she thought I was Eddie Sands. Thinking how completely she had kissed me, and how soft and sweet she had been. This kid had everything. And who am I to be less human than the next guy? All right, I kissed her again.

Maybe it was gratitude, maybe it was something else. I don't know. Anyway her arms went around my neck and she kissed me back, almost as completely as she'd kissed me at the summer house!

And after a while when she'd waved good-by, I felt better than ever. For one thing, I felt like I knew damned well she hadn't burned Eddie Sands down. She was as scared of a gun as her old man was crazy about them. The way she'd stepped out of the closet proved that.

Now I don't know why I stepped into that closet, because I don't even keep my hat there. Naturally it couldn't have been because that's the hiding place of my spare liquor. Anyway, I found the letter Beth thought



I staggered toward the French window, and still she clung to me.

she'd brought. I nearly fell out of my chair. *It was on my stationery!*

And just as she'd said, it instructed her to bring eight grand and place it in the customary place at the river house!

My stationery. Listen, I thought a long while over that one. And I only got one answer. I knew, and knew damned well as any thinking person would know, that if I'd been blackmailing anyone I would not use

my own letterheads. So—the answer: someone wanted Beth to think it *was* me. And who knew I was connected with it in any way? The killer! What if the killer had knocked off Sands, hid in the bushes there and saw the two of us, Beth and me?

IT TOOK a long while for eight o'clock to come, an eight o'clock that found me driving the old jalopy into the Townsend estate. A frozen-faced butler took my hat, chilled me with the information that the rest of the party was at the swimming pool and pointed me in the right direction.

I went through the garden, through the elm grove, and hit the river. I could hear a woman laughing, then, and rounding the bend came to the pool, made where the river had been dammed. Some two hundred yards farther down a brick structure like a miniature Rhine castle thrust out over the wide stream.

Charlotte Townsend, of course, was the center of attraction. And she enjoyed it, as always. I will say this, she was at home in a swimming suit in more ways than one. It was of white rubber, and it was hard to say where the suit left off and skin began. The mellow arc lights illuminated the pool itself, the sides were in semi-darkness. Two men sat together on the far side of the pool.

Charlotte intercepted me, crawling, wet and glistening from the pool like a water nymph. Her greeting was coy, but her eyes were meaning. She stood so close to me that she dripped water on my shoe-tops, and as she laid her hand on my arm, she seemed to stumble. Sure, I caught

her. And sure, just as sure, she felt soft and utterly feminine in my arms as she murmured, "Don't forget, Joe, I'm in. In for half. It's fifty-fifty, you and I, from here on out."

I finally got to the other end of the pool as she walked away toward the house, her legs gleaming and glittering, her hand waving flirtatiously in farewell.

Jim Swanson, in the shadows, said, "Old friend, Walsh, or new friend?" I could see his damned white teeth shining there and knew he was grinning like an ape. I spotted the frosted cocktail shaker, found it was dry, and grumbled, "Old friend. You know that. What are we all gathered together for, my friends?"

Ritchie answered. "Hell, who knows? Little Beth and her father have been rowing all day. The old man's got that muddling-through look on his face. It's something about Sands getting killed."

Bye and bye the butler came out and said the colonel would see us all in the library. Ritchie hung back with me. He whispered, "Has Beth said anything to you about being in trouble?"

I said, "No." No need to tell him the kid had managed to slip off and put me wise. Or try to kill me, anyway you want to look at it. Jim Swanson turned around and grinned at us then, and we didn't say any more.

COLONEL TOWNSEND'S library wasn't, strictly speaking, a library, although he had a few volumes scattered here and there. The old colonel was a gun fan, and in practically every room of the house

you could find guns. Now, Charlotte was sitting demurely in a deep chair, wearing a simple dress that made her look anything but simple. The colonel, bald-headed and broad-backed, was examining a gun by the light of a table lamp. He waved it.

"Sit down, gentlemen," he said, not too sternly. "I have just received a new match pistol which some of you may like to examine. Ritchie, you're a marksman, you'll be interested. And you, gentlemen?"

So, of course, to humor the old duck, we gathered round. Me, I like guns, guns that stop a man, like .44's and .45's and Lugers and Mausers. This was a .22 target pistol, one of those imported Buchel William Tells.

While Jim Swanson was examining it, the colonel walked across the library—and it was a big room—and pressed a button. A panel slid back, revealing a man-size figure against the wall, a figure made of cork. The colonel inserted a thumb tack between the eyes. Then without a word he took the pistol from Swanson, walked to the far wall and wheeled. I'll swear he hardly aimed. The gun spatted and when we walked over and looked, the thumb tack had disappeared. Nobody said anything while the panel slid back into place.

The colonel placed the pistol on the desk and sat down. He said, "Gentlemen, first of all, I wonder if you know what tradition means, what it means to bear an honored name like Townsend."

If we didn't, we knew ten minutes later. He went into details. Finally he stood up. "You, Mr. Swanson, I find, are almost positive that my

daughter, Beth, has played around with Edward Sands, who was murdered on these very grounds."

You could have heard a pin drop.

"Other people," and he glared at me, "seem to think the same thing. So much so, that demands have been made on my daughter for blackmail." He paused, and very deliberately reloaded the single shot pistol. A spot between my eyes began to ache suddenly. What had Beth told him? Had she shown him any blackmail notes written on my stationery?

When he spoke again, his voice sounded very tired. "So, gentlemen, I have decided to clear up two crimes at once. These facts will be verified by my daughter at the proper time. First, she did play around with Edward Sands. When she tried to break with him, he held it over her head, threatened to come to me. I am compelled to tell you, gentlemen, that I shot Sands to shield my daughter!"

All I could see was Jim Swanson's gleaming teeth.

"Unfortunately, I shot the rascal and threw the pistol at his feet after wiping it clean of fingerprints. My daughter ran from the pergola. In her fright she seized the pistol. One of Sands' confederates, all set for blackmail, snapped a picture of her at that precise moment, bending over the corpse with the gun in her hand. Since that time he has blackmailed her twice."

HIS voice died away. Every eye in the room followed his gaze—which was directed at me. And I had to hand it to him. Whether you liked him or not he was a magnificent

(Continued on page 122)

Three Time Loser

By
R. T.
MAYNARD

LARRABEE •



MRS. GRAVELLE •

It was like a jig-saw puzzle, and it was my bad luck to be there on other business when the shooting started. If I hadn't known Laurine, and if I hadn't recognized Jerson, the whole story might have ended differently





FTER having fishily surveyed Pete Larrabee's frayed blue serge and decrepit slouch hat, the butler's face took on a superciliously disapproving expression. He raised his nose haughtily as if that organ had been

The woman's scream was shrill, harsh, and raw. Her eyes were pools of horror.

GRAVELLE •



mortally offended by a nasty smell. "Have you an appointment with Mr. Gravelle?" he asked, pointedly omitting the customary "sir."

Larrabee flicked away the last quarter inch of his cigarette. The butt described a glowing parabola against the deep blueness of the moonlit night; landed in the ornate, formal garden with a puff of sparks. "I have an appointment," he answered politely.

Framed in the arched doorway of the Colonial residence, the butler said: "I shall have to request your calling card, my good man." His tone indicated that he profoundly doubted the existence of such a thing.

He was right. Pete Larrabee had no card. "Will this do instead?" he asked gently, displaying the badge that proclaimed him a lieutenant of detectives in the metropolitan police department.

The butler looked shocked; he almost winced. Larrabee wondered about that. A man with a pure conscience isn't supposed to turn pale at the sight of a cop. "Did Mr.

Gravelle send for you . . . sir?"

"He sent for me."

"What about?"

Larrabee said patiently: "I really don't know. He told me to be here at eight o'clock sharp; he didn't say why. It is now twenty minutes of eight. I'm early. My name is Peter Halloran Larrabee. I have sandy hair, gray eyes, weigh a hundred and seventy pounds and stand six feet one in my stocking feet. My father's name was Dan and my mother was a Sullivan before she married him. I'm thirty-two years of age. Is there any other information you'd like to have before you take me to see Mr. Gravelle? Or perhaps," Pete's voice grew brittle, "you would care for a nice swift bash on the puss?"

Unmoved by sarcasm, the butler wilted like stale lettuce at the prospect of a nice swift bash in the puss. "Er—you may come in, sir," he said hastily.

LARRABEE took a last look at the lovely garden behind him, before entering the house. The night was lush, with the full moon electroplating a coating of blue-silver on terraced grounds and marble statuary. Off to the left there was a colonnaded pergola, vine-bowered and cozy; near it a fountain-pool topped by a grotesque figure of Pan the half-goat. Busily fingering his pipes at the house proper, Pan flirted a marble stub of tail at the pergola; while below him, lesser fauns and nymphs disported in the splashing fountain, their gyrations frozen in the marble of which they were hewn. All in all, it was very spiffy.

Within the house, the butler said:

"Please wait here in the drawing-room, sir. I shall see if Mr. Gravelle is ready for you, sir. You understand, sir, that I meant no offense—"

"—sir," Larrabee supplied. He smiled gently. "Okay. Forget it." He quite understood the butler's hesitancy in admitting him. Geoffrey Gravelle, the retired millionaire inventor, doted on seclusion. That was natural enough; otherwise the old boy would have been run ragged by crackpots seeking interviews, proposing harebrained schemes and whining for largess. . . .

The servant turned to go from the room, Larabee's eyes suddenly narrowed, and he sucked in a swift sharp breath. "Wait a minute, cousin. *Where did you get that scar on your neck?*"

"Why, sir—er—I—I—" The man's sudden pallor assumed a definitely greenish cast.

Larrabee said: "I know you now. Your name used to be Jerson."

"It—it is still Jerson, sir!"

"You did a stretch in Sing Sing ten years ago for manslaughter," Larrabee said. He added softly: "You've put on a lot of weight. These jowls and sideburns fooled me."

The butler's hauteur was dissipated like fog under a desert's probing, relentless midday sun. "Please, sir—Mr. Larrabee—I've gone straight these last few years! Don't g-give me away! I—"

"What," Larrabee asked conversationally, "ever became of Lew Briotto, the guy who was sent up with you for that killing?"

"I—he—I don't know!" the butler whispered. His lips were flaccid



"But, honey, I didn't do it! You can't arrest me!" Hating himself, he did what he had to.

with fear; he trembled all over, pudgily.

"All right. Scram. If you've been going straight, you haven't got anything to worry about. Tell Gravelle I'm here."

The servant once more headed for the drawing room door, this time limply. At the threshold somebody stopped him and said: "Who is that man, Jerson?"

REALIZING that he was the one alluded to, Pete Larrabee bent an inquisitive eye at the speaker and saw that she was a remarkably stun-

ning blonde in a trailing house-negligee; a blonde with more curves than any one woman had a right to own. Her clear skin, her plump, unlined face was almost incongruously babyish in contrast to the mature perfection of her lush form.

Jerson, answering her, said: "He is a detective, madame. Mr. Gravelle summoned him."

"Really? Well, I'll speak to him. You may go, Jerson."

"You wish me to inform Mr. Gravelle that—?"

"I said, you may go!"

"Very good, madame." The butler departed silently.

Entering the drawing room, the blonde faced Pete Larrabee. "Why did my husband send for you?"

"I'm sure I don't know."

She assumed a coquettish smile. "You detectives!" she giggled coyly. "You're so mysterious!" She patted him lightly on the cheek. "But you needn't try to hide anything from me. After all, I'm Geoffrey's wife."

Her perfume was expensively alluring. Larrabee began to feel uneasy. "Listen, lady," he began.

"Not a word! You're coming upstairs with me so you can tell me all about it. I *love* detectives!"

She put a carload of emphasis on the word *love*. Larrabee blinked and wondered what in hell was about to happen to him.

BEFORE he knew it, he was in a rose-tinted boudoir with a glass of Napoleon brandy in his hand and Amelia Gravelle sitting alongside him on a gold-colored chaise-lounge. "Now," she purred in her throat. "Tell me."

"Tell you what?"

"Tell me why you're here."

He drained the cognac, fished for a cigarette and lighted it. She took it from his lips, deliberately, and placed it in her own rouged, petulant mouth.

He said: "That was my last gasper, lady. I forgot to buy a fresh pack before I started out here."

"Is that all you're interested in—a cigarette?"

Larrabee smiled. "No. I'm interested in seeing your husband."

"Why?"

"Damned if I know. He sent for me."

She nestled closer to him, crushed out the cigarette and put her hands on his shiny serge lapels. "Geoffrey's horrid. He's jealous of me. He thinks I'm too . . . friendly . . . with Count D'Esmonde. That's why you're here, isn't it? You're supposed to spy on me."

"Nix. I—"

"Don't deny it, you naughty boy. But you won't really spy on me, will you?"

"No; of course not. You like me too much, don't you? And if I ask you to report nice things about me to Geoffrey, you'll do it, won't you? You . . . won't be sorry . . ." Her parted lips were very close to his and he could feel the warm flutter of her breath on his cheek.

He decided to put a stop to this nonsense. Get coquettish with him, would she? What she needed was a lesson. He leaned forward suddenly and drew her into an embrace that squeezed the breath out of her in a swift exhalation. He brought his mouth down on her lips so savagely that she almost winced. He meant to hurt her, and didn't care

if his fingers left bruises where they gripped her.

But the joke was on him. She went for it. She *liked* it! She wrapped her arms sensuously around his neck and glued herself to him.

"Boy!" she exclaimed, and he felt like a man who's caught a wildcat by the tail and can't let go....

SOBERED, finally, he drew away, straightening his necktie. "I came here on business, baby," he said ruefully.

"I know . . . but you *will* report nice things to Geoffrey about me, won't you?" she pouted. "You won't spy on me if I happen to be . . . with Count D'Esmonde . . .?"

He said: "Look. I don't mix myself in domestic messes. That's not my job. I'm not a private snoop. I'm a headquarters man."

Her baby-blue eyes widened, then narrowed venomously. "Why—you—you rat! You're a cop, eh? And you allowed me to think—you led me to believe—"

"Hold it, lady," Larrabee said evenly. "You did all the conclusion-jumping. That wasn't my fault. I—"

"Get out!" she said harshly, leaping to her feet. "Get out—before I scream!"

He got out, mopping his forehead and wondering how old Geoffrey Gravelle had ever come to marry such a wild little hell-cat. Of all the feather-brained, man-crazy dames Pete had ever encountered, Mrs. Gravelle was the worst!

"Ah, nuts!" he told himself, and went downstairs. At the foot of the staircase he looked around for Jer-
son, the butler—and collided with

a slender, red-haired girl whose violet eyes opened wide when she saw him.

"Pete!" she gasped.

"Laurine!" he exclaimed.

His surprise was genuine. Laurine Purdue had once been his sweetheart; but a year ago they had quarreled, and Laurine had gone away. He hadn't seen her until now.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded, his gaze hungrily drinking in her slim feminine contours and her piquant, insouciant features.

She was very youthful, very lovely. Her plain little linen frock complemented the sweet lines of her delicate figure. She was adorably dainty, girlishly fresh and appealing. . . . "Why, I—I'm Mrs. Gravelle's social secretary, Pete," she faltered. "And what are *you* doing here?"

"Old Man Gravelle sent for a cop—thank God!" Larrabee said slowly. "Boy, honey, I'm glad to see you . . . !" He made a move to take her into his arms.

BUT that pleasure was foredoomed to postponement. From upstairs Amelia Gravelle's voice called: "Laurine—come up here, please. I want you!"

The red-haired girl reluctantly went toward the staircase. "Later . . . Pete, darling . . ."

It was a whispered promise; an indication that she was no longer sore at him. His pulse raced. "Baby!" he said. Then: "Where is Gravelle? I better see him now."

"He's in his study." Laurine pointed to a closed door. Then she ran upstairs.

Larrabee went to the study and knocked. A snarly voice said: "Come in."

Entering, Larrabee discovered himself in a leather-lined room panelled in fumed English oak, the air blue with pipe smoke. In a deep chair sat Geoffrey Gravelle, the retired inventor: a hunch-backed, gnomish little man with wrinkled visage and deep-set, malicious little eyes. "Who the hell are you?" he rasped unpleasantly.

"Lieutenant Larrabee from headquarters, sir."

Gravelle looked at the diamond-studded gold wrist-watch that nested itself against the thick hairs of his skinny forearm. You are five minutes late. A hell of a police department we've got in this town."

Larrabee remained discreetly silent.

He could have alibied himself by explaining that he'd been plenty early; that he'd got side-tracked by Mrs. Gravelle. . . . But that would never do. In this case, silence was golden.

Gravelle said:

"I sent for you because I think I'm being robbed."

"Robbed?"

"You heard me. I've missed currency from my desk several times lately. I want you to do something about it."

Larrabee thought of Jerson, the jail-bird butler. "Do you suspect anyone, sir?"

The inventor snorted. "If I did, I'd say so, you numbskull! It's your job to suspect people, not mine. Damn that light," he added bitterly as a table-lamp flickered. "Nobody ever thinks to put new bulbs in

around here!" He snapped the switch off and on; the incandescent ceased flickering, burned once more with a steady glow. "Now, about the thefts—"

"Yes, sir. How much money have you missed?"

"The first time it was ten dollars." The old hunchback settled again into his easy-chair. "Then five. Then twenty—" He stopped short, his elucidation punctuated by four sharp, staccato periods that sounded like revolver shots from somewhere in the outer garden. "What the bloody hell?" he rasped. "Who's shooting fire-crackers?"

From the moonlit night a woman screamed shrilly in answer. The sound was raw and harsh, as if it might have lacerated the throat from which it issued.

PETE LARRABEE lurched toward the door of the study, every instinct alive to trouble. Those pistol shots; that scream—"By God!" he whispered, and went plunging along the hallway to the front door. He burst out into the blue moonglow.

He saw a white, indistinct figure drifting around toward the side of the house. It vanished. He thought he saw another shadow-shape moving on the other side of the garden, but he couldn't be positive; it, too disappeared as he looked. Atop the fountain, that marble statue of Pan flirted its stubby tail at Larrabee as he paused on the porticoed porch. Then, from over near the colonnaded pergola, there came another keening shriek.

The detective hurled himself toward the sound's source. He gained

the pergola, and his mouth felt abruptly parched; his throat went tight. "Laurine—!" he said

She came swaying into his arms, her red hair darkened by the moonlight.

Her eyes were haunted by horror, and there was hysteria in her throat as she wailed: "Pete — my God — *Pete!*" And she collapsed against him.

He caught her, held her close, and stared toward the pergola. His heart seemed to stop beating for a frozen instant. There was a man lying under the arbored vines; a man whose white shirt was stained darkly in three different places....

Light footfalls swiftly crunched the gravel walkway; Amelia Gravelle, trailing white negligee behind her like a cloud, raced forward. "Wh—what happened?"

"Hold Miss Purdue!" Larrabee snapped. "This looks like a bump-off." Leaving Laurine sagging against the blonde, he strode to the pergola. "By God, it *is* a bump-off!"

The dead man was dark, Latin-looking; he had three bullet-holes through his chest. Larrabee lifted the limp corpse to a concrete bench in the pergola; moonlight and flickering illumination from Geoffrey Gravelle's study-window helped the detective to see that the swarthy man was beyond aid. Amelia Gravelle moaned: "Oh-h-h . . . it's Count D'Esmonde. . . !" Then she drew back from the red-haired girl and slapped her viciously across the cheek. "You killed him, you—you—!"

Pete Larrabee barked: "None of that!" and rescued Laurine from the

blonde's attack. Laurine opened her eyes and trembled.

"My God . . ." she moaned. "Those shots—Count D'Esmonde fell at my feet—"

"Count, hell!" Larrabee said. "That guy wasn't any nobleman. He was Lew Briotto, a thug; a stir-bug!"

"Wh-what?" Amelia Gravelle gasped.

Her hunchbacked husband shambled up. "A stir-bug!" he said in his malicious, crackling voice. "A jailbird, my dear. So that's the sort of men you go for, eh?"

"How dare you!" the blonde screamed at the top of her lungs. "He never meant anything to me! It was this red-haired fool that killed him! Look at her! Ask her what she was doing with him out here!"

"Stow it, all of you," Larrabee said evenly. He put an arm around Laurine's waist. "Come on into the house, honey. I want to ask you some things."

Within the mansion, he paused long enough to phone Headquarters and report the killing; it would take the Homicide men fifteen or twenty minutes to make the trip—maybe longer. Ringing off, Larrabee took Laurine upstairs to her own room; closed the door. "What happened, sweetness?"

She clung to him, her slim body shuddering with tremors of fear. "Pete—you don't th-think, *I* shot him—?"

"I'm asking you."

"I—I was with him in the pergola—"

"Why were you?"

"Mrs. Gravelle asked me to go

to him and deliver a message."

"What message?"

"That she wouldn't meet him in the garden at eight o'clock. . . ."

Larrabee frowned. "Was she in the habit of meeting him there at that hour every evening?"

"Y-yes. I think she and the count—"

"Lew Briotto," he corrected her.

"Wh-whatever his name was, he'd been . . . making passes at Mrs. Gravelle; I'm almost sure of it. Ever since he's been a house-guest here. Mr. Gravelle always goes to bed early, and . . ."

Larrabee said: "But Briotto also had his eye on you, huh?"

She blushed painfully. "He . . . he was awfully annoying. And tonight he grabbed me; k-kissed me. . . . And then those shots—just as I broke away from him—he fell down and groaned and bled—and that Pan-statue grinning at me—" She locked her arms around Larrabee's neck. "Pete, honey, I didn't do it! You can't arrest me! Please—!"

FOR a moment he lost his poise. Her lithe slenderness filled him with yearning; her tremulous lips were parted. . . .

He kissed her. She moaned as his hard body tightened against her.

But something stopped him then; he hated the ugly thought that intruded itself, but it existed and it demanded an answer. Was Laurine surrendering her kisses to him because she wanted him to keep her out of prison? Was she being so sweet in payment for her freedom? If so, it meant that she must be guilty. And he couldn't go on with her on those conditions. He wanted

love, not that sort of bribery. And he couldn't be sure of anything—until he knew who had murdered Lew Briotto in the pergola.

Reluctantly, he released Laurine from his embrace. "Listen, baby," he said slowly. "Did you see anybody in the garden when it happened?"

"I—I thought I saw Jerson over beyond the Pan-fountain—"

"Jerson!" Larrabee sprang to the door, cursing himself mentally. What a fool he'd been to forget the ex-convict butler! It all linked up; Jerson—the theft of money—the presence of Lew Briotto sailing under false colors as a titled house-guest—

LUNGING swiftly downstairs toward the servants' quarters at the rear of the house, Larrabee assembled all the jig-saw pieces in his mind. In the lower hall he bumped into a maid. "Where's Jerson's room?"

She pointed to a closed door; he smashed it open. He saw Jerson on the other side of the room, at a raised window. Jerson had a top-coat on; he was carrying a packed Gladstone. He was just about to scramble over the sill when he heard Larrabee entering. The butler swung around with a snarl peeling back his lips and an automatic clenched in his left fist. He aimed both snarl and gun at Larrabee and said: "Don't come any closer. I'm warning you, copper."

Larrabee froze. "So that's it. You killed Briotto. He was your old pal; you and he did a stretch together—for manslaughter. After you got out of the Big House, you tried to go straight. You landed this buttling

job with Gravelle. Then Lew Briotto showed up. He was posing as a foreign count; he was after easy dough. You didn't dare expose him — because he probably threatened to show you up as an ex-con. You had to keep still about him. He made a play for Mrs. Gravelle; maybe was figuring on glomming her jewelry or something. In the meantime he made you keep him in funds; that's why you kept lifting petty cash out of Gravelle's desk. But when I showed up tonight, you decided to get out from under Briotto. So you drilled him while he was making his play for Laurine Purdue."

JERSON'S lips worked moistly; he made sounds in his throat. "You've got part of it right, copper. Briotto did everything you say; but I never stole any petty cash. And I didn't plug him tonight." His voice rose like a madman's. "*But I'm going to plug you!* You can't pin a murder rap on me, damn you!" His finger tightened spasmodically on the trigger.

Larrabee said softly. "Better not do it, Jerson. You'll fry. You'll fry, sure as hell."

"I can't fry more than once!" Jerson choked. "You're trying to make a fall guy out of me—and I won't stand for it! Why don't you pinch Mrs. Gravelle? Maybe she got crazy jealous when she saw Briotto putting the maul on the red-haired frill. Yah. Mrs. Gravelle! *She* was in the garden when Briotto got what was coming to him—while you were in the house talking to the old man! I saw her!"

"So you admit you were in the garden," Larrabee said; and he catapulted at the butler.

JERSON clipped him over the temple with the automatic's snout. The detective went down in a whirring welter of stars; felt blood running down his numbed face from an ugly flesh-gash on his forehead. He tried to regain his feet, but his legs were like gruel; they wouldn't obey the orders of his pain-blasted brain. He buried his face on the rug and quivered helplessly for more than a minute.

When he staggered tipsily upright, Jerson was gone; had lunged through the open window and vanished in the night. From the front part of the house, sounds arose. Voices, footfalls, excitement. The Homicide men from Headquarters had finally arrived.

Larrabee lurched from the butler's room; started to walk toward the front corridor. Someone came racing down the rear staircase. It was Laurine. "Pete—you won't let them arrest me. . . . Oh-h-h . . . you are hurt! My dearest . . . you are bleeding. . . ."

"Forget it," he said. He pulled her close to him. His head was buzzing. God, what a mess! So many suspects—all with motive and opportunity! Jerson, killing because he was being blackmailed by a former cellmate. . . . Amelia Gravelle, killing because of an insane jealousy. . . . Laurine, killing in defense of her honor while the Pan-statue leered down at her. . . . "No! No!" Larrabee groaned. He welded a kiss on the red-haired girl's parted lips. Then, hating himself, he clicked his handcuffs on her wrists.

She paled. "Pete—what?"

He pushed her into a room adjoining Jerson's, under the back

stairs. "Stay there," he told her gruffly. Then he stumbled forward along the corridor.

The front door was open. A police squad-car was drawn up under the portico; plainclothes men were grouped under the colonnaded pergola, looking at Lew Briotto's corpse. Hunchbacked old Geoffrey Gravelle was there; so was his sensuous blonde wife.

They were lifting Briotto's body from the concrete bench as Larrabee neared the pergola. From the window of the study, a steady light cut through the moonglow; fell across the dead man's contorted, swarthy features and blood-bathed chest. Out in the garden, atop the pool-fountain, Pan flirted his marble stub of a tail at the corpse. If only that damned statue could have seen the killing, Larrabee thought. If only Pan could talk; could tell.

AND then the detective stiffened. Pan had talked! *Pan had told him what he wanted to know!* Pan . . . and something that Laurine Purdue had let slip! Something that Larrabee now remembered!

He barged toward Captain Delehanty, in charge of the Homicide detail. Delehanty said: "Hi, Pete—Hey! What the hell happened to you?"

"The butler slugged me. His name's Jerson. He's an ex-con. He was a cell-mate of this dead guy. He lammed. But he can't be far away."

"Then Jerson—did this?"

Larrabee shrugged. "I don't think so. But I've got the nippers on somebody who knows what actually happened!"

"What?" Delehanty yelled.

Larrabee nodded. "Yes. A dame. Laurine Purdue; Mrs. Gravelle's social secretary. She won't talk; she lied to me. But she let something slip. She knows the truth. Maybe she's holding out because she's looking for a cash pay-off from the murderer. I hate to say that . . . because I love her."

"Where the hell is this dame?"

"In her room."

"Handcuffed?"

"Yes."

Delehanty turned to Gravelle and his wife. "You two beat it back to the house." They obeyed. He swung around to his three underlings. "Smith and Robbins—start looking for that butler bozo. Reynolds, you stick here with the stiff." He took Larrabee's arm. "Come on, Pete. We'll make the Purdue wren spill what she knows."

Larrabee nodded heavily and raced toward the house with Delehanty. Inside, Larrabee pointed rearward. "She's in that room under the back stairs. But don't start on her yet. Wait till I give you the office."

"Where the hell are you going?"

"Upstairs a minute." Larrabee pelted up the front staircase, silently. He made for Laurine's bedroom. Its door was ajar; the room itself black. A shot blasted that darkness.

Larrabee hurtled over the threshold. He smashed into a frail, misshapen form. "*Got you Geoffrey Gravelle—you murderer!*"

The hunchback squealed viciously. "Don't be a fool! I just saw Jerson going out the window—he fired at the bed—"

"Yeah. Then what's this hot rod doing in your pocket?" Larrabee pulled an automatic from Gravelle's smoking-jacket.

Gravelle snarled: "Damn you!"

Delehanty came roaring up the stairs, having heard the pistol-blast. "What goes on?" he bellowed.

"This man murdered Lew Briotto," Larrabee said.

Gravelle squirmed; foam flecked his twisting lips. "You can't do this to me! You can't prove—"

"I can prove everything," Larrabee said softly. "I let you think that Laurine Purdue was wise to you; that she was here in her room. I knew you'd sneak up here to stop her mouth with a bullet, hoping to blame it on Jerson—an innocent man. But Laurine isn't in this room; she's downstairs. You fired at an empty bed.

"So what? Is that a crime?"

"No; but it proved my point. You knew your wife was playing around with Briotto, who called himself Count D'Esmonde. You knew she was in the habit of meeting him in the pergola around eight o'clock each evening, as soon as you went to bed. You invented an outfit to kill them both."

"Why, damn your eyes—I!"

LARRABEE said: "It was a very clever invention, and you had yourself nicely covered. You sent for a detective; complained about money being stolen from your desk. That was a lie; there wasn't any cash taken from your study. All that you wanted was an alibi. You wanted a policeman with you in the study while your wife and her lover were being killed in the garden.

"You had electric wires rigged under the concrete bench on the pergola, where they did their petting. The minute anybody sat on that bench, you knew it — because the lamp in your study flickered. I've got proof of that. When I lifted Briotto's corpse to the bench, the light from your window got unsteady. Later, when Delehanty's men moved the body, that light didn't flicker any more.

"So the flicker was your signal. It told that your victims were in the trap. You pretended to fiddle with your lamp. You clicked a concealed switch. That put the machinery in motion."

"What machinery, Pete?" Delehanty asked sharply.

"The pipes of Pan. They weren't pipes. They were guns. Each pipe held a bullet and a firing mechanism. The muzzles were set so that they aimed directly at the pergola-bench."

Gravelle yelled: "You're crazy! That statue of Pan faces the front door of this house! Its back is toward the pergola!"

"Yes," Larrabee answered. "I know. That's the way it faces now. That's the way it faced when I arrived here tonight. But at the time of the killing, *that statue faced the pergola!*"

"I'll be damned!" Delehanty whispered.

Larrabee said: "It was a clever murder-machine. You must have installed the mechanism late at night —several nights, when everybody in the house was asleep. The statue works on a pivot, with a motor to turn it.

The whole thing is controlled

from your study-lamp. That's why a half-minute elapsed between the time you clicked the switch and the instant the shots were fired. You'd already sat down in your chair again when I heard the reports. In that half-minute, Pan was swinging around to face the pergola. Later, you found an opportunity to reverse the machinery, and pivot the statue back."

Larabee finished: "Tonight, Mrs. Gravelle thought that I'd been hired to spy on her love-making. So she protected herself; she didn't go out to meet Briotto. She sent Lau-

rine Purdue instead. If you'd killed Laurine, I would have broken your neck," he said quietly.

Delehanty said: "That won't be necessary. The State will take care of the job. Let's go check on that wiring."

Gravelle smiled ruefully. "I'll be very glad to explain how it works," he said in a resigned voice. "Perhaps, if I confess everything, I may not go to the gallows...."

Larrabee wasn't listening. He was on his way down to the room where he'd left the girl he was so terribly in love with.

ON WITH THE KILL

(Continued from page 109)

he'd been in the library with his guests when the shot was fired! I knew what had happened!

Beth had told him the whole thing, and deep down inside of him he'd been afraid that *she actually had killed Sands herself!* This way there'd be scandal, of course. But not nearly as much scandal as if Swanson grinned and blundered his way along until he pinned it on the girl!

Swanson said, "And your daughter will corroborate that, Colonel?"

The old man pulled a bell cord. The frozen-faced butler appeared. He sent him for Beth Townsend. And there wasn't much conversation while the butler was gone. When he came back, he was alone. Even his face was melted. He held a note in his hand, which he handed to the colonel. Up came the pince nez. As he read, color receded from

his pink jowls. And before anyone could catch him he toppled from the chair to the floor.

Swanson got the note. But I read it over his shoulder. It was from Beth.

Daddy dear: I can't let you do it. I can't. I know from the way you talk that deep in your heart you think I killed him. All right, it's the truth! I killed Edward Sands. I'm going away, Daddy, where neither you nor the police will ever find me. I'm sorry, but it's best. I can't let you face a murder trial.

Beth.

"When was she seen last?" snapped Swanson. "Bring in the servants."

They brought them in. She hadn't been seen since dinner. Bit by bit he

traced her movements about the house, all but a period of a couple of hours that midday.

"She was down to see me," I admitted.

Ritchie looked at me. Swanson looked at me. The colonel said bleakly from the chair, "Gentlemen, will you leave me alone a few minutes? Please." He was an old, old man.

Out on the *patio* I tried to figure it out. Swanson was making the necessary phone calls. The Lord knew where Ritchie was. I heard a swish of garments and there was Charlotte. Hell, I can't remember even now what we talked about.

She was nervous and upset and ex-cited. And me, I was thinking how soon the colonel would make a black-mail accusation against me. I don't even remember walking along the path to that damned pergola. I remember fumbling for cigarettes, remember her taking the lighter out of my hands. And as she flicked it, I remember the wild look in her eyes.

She stepped so far away from me that I had to lean forward. Leaning forward saved my life. The bullet actually left a hot trace along the back of my neck, staggered me a little, so that I fell up against her. She was sobbing, half screaming, trying to push me away.

"The blood, the blood," she kept moaning. Then I fought my way free, grabbed my own gun and went through the bushes toward that shot.

And I found nothing.

Returning to the pergola I found Charlotte gone. So I heeled it back to the house. She wasn't on the *patio*. Somewhere I could hear the *thump-thump-thump* of a strange noise. It was Swanson, trying to bust down

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the library door.

"Help me," he grated and the smile was gone. We broke that lock together.

The colonel was slumped over his desk. There was a little round hole in his right temple. The Buchel William Tell was in his right hand.

"The colonel," said Swanson softly, "can't take it. Poor guy."

"My God!" It was Ritchie, standing wide-eyed just inside the door. "He killed himself!"

Swanson made a circuit of the windows. They were all locked. And the library door had been locked on the inside!

A scream rang out, there was a thud. Charlotte Townsend was a crumpled heap of feminine flesh.

MIDNIGHT. There was a pick-up order out for Beth Townsend. The colonel was dead as hell at the undertaker's. And me, I was still waiting for a heart to heart talk with little Charlotte. I wanted it plenty, plenty bad.

A few minutes after midnight the doctor came down the steps. I heard him tell Swanson that he thought Mrs. Townsend would sleep a little more quietly now. So I went upstairs and went in without knocking. She had a funny way of sleeping, pacing back and forth, back and forth. She didn't hear me enter.

Cigarette smoke trailed after her as she went to the French doors. Crystalline moonlight revealed every line of her lush figure. I touched her shoulder. She whirled.

"Joe! Oh!" She slumped against me.

"I'm so glad you came," she whispered. "Stay with me, Joe. I'm all alone now!"

I shook her. "You know why I'm here," I grated. "You let me out to that pergola and put me on the spot, damn you! Don't lie. Why would

you insist on working the lighter? Why did you hold it so far away from you? Because the light illuminated my face. Now who shot at me? Who tried to gun me out?"

She began to whimper. "I didn't want to do it! He made me, Joe. You know he made me. Why, we were going to be partners, we'll be partners yet—"

"Who?" I know my fingers bruised her.

She whispered, "My husband! Colonel Zach!"

For a minute I stood still. It was possible.

He could have taken a shot at me, figuring to take justice into his own hands, then skedaddled for the house.

"You believe me, Joe?" and I almost did.

Except for a couple of things, things like two flashes of a flashlight down there by the river. Two short ones, a wait, then two short ones again. And when I turned curiously toward her, the moon swept into the room and illuminated a table beside the French doors. And on that table was a big powerful flashlight!

"Maybe that's the colonel, too, damn you," I grated and tore away from her. I grabbed the light and thrust it into her hand. And I grabbed the white column of her throat and squeezed like hell. "Answer that signal before I choke you to death!"

And she gave the same signal in answer!

The light along the river did not answer. I began to have my doubts. I opened the screen and started to step out. And she caught me with that flashlight! *Wham!* I staggered, clutched the porch rail. And down across the moonlit strip by the river,

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not far from the pool, I saw a running man.

Wham! Boy, she meant business. I slumped down against the rail and she dragged me back inside, kicking and flailing. I caught a knee in the temple, and when everything started going black, a pair of arms went beneath my chin and locked. My head was pressed backward against her.

All the time she never made a sound except the deep breathing that filled her chest. Somehow, I got to my feet, with her still on my back. The moon was spinning, lights danced before my eyes. I staggered toward the window; she began to twist my head savagely from side to side. And I stumbled and dove against the wall.

Thump-thump-thump on the door. "What's going on in there? Open up!"

I STAGGERED to my feet. She lay in a patch of moonlight, breathing deeply, her tapering legs sprawled white and limp in the moonlight. Her eyes were closed, a trickle of blood ran from a small split in her scalp. I didn't wait. I went over the balcony, down the trellis and hit the ground running.

The river house, the little Rhine Castle. It was dark inside. I stepped into the darkness, wishing for my flashlight. I didn't need it, for another one lit up the whole thing, the corridor ahead of me, and Beth's voice said desperately, "Walk straight ahead and open the door, Walsh, or so help me, I'll shoot."

What was the use to argue then? Besides, I was too much out of breath. I opened the door. A voice from the shadows said, "Thanks, Beth, you've saved me a lot of trouble." And the whole damned ceiling

fell on my head. I think rage brought me out of it.

When I get mad, I'm mad. This was a little too much. Getting shot at, getting half killed by a crazy dame, getting framed for blackmail, when all I'd done was try to help out a poor little friendless fool! And to top it off, it was the poor little dame that had gotten me into it now. I opened my eyes. And I saw the dame.

The flashlight lay on the table. It outlined the dame against the wall, her arms were outspread in terror.

"You mean—you mean—?" she faltered.

The man laughed. "Now you're getting it, you little fool. There are two hundred bone dry casks in this room. I aimed to let them find one body after the fire, yours, but now there'll be two! Clever, wasn't it? Putting you against your old man. You confess to save him, he confesses to save you, and all the time I did the killing. But we got time, we got time!"

He reached for her. "Go on and yell, kid, no one will hear you. Go on."

I jumped. I won't worry you with the battle. I'll just tell you this, I got my hands on his throat and hung on. Bye and bye they were hammering at the outer door and when Beth let them in they had to pull me off.

I stared down at Ritchie and said, "There's the guy that's made this a merry-go-round." And they had to hold me to keep me from hopping him again.

"**A**LL right," said Jim Swanson, still grinning his little boy smile, a drink in his hand, "now we are getting some place. You tried to

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cover up the girl. The girl was convinced by Ritchie that her father would burn for the rap, so she confessed to the killing herself. Then Ritchie tried to kill the girl. Why?"

"Who?" I asked, "would inherit?"

Every eye turned to the sobbing Charlotte Townsend. "Look, Boy Scout," I was a little sore at that grin. With all the kicking around I'd got I didn't feel like grinning. "Ritchie and Sands were to work the blackmail gag. Sands makes love to the little dame, thinking his pretty picture was to be taken. It was—after he was dead, and when the dame was leaning over him with a gun in her hand. Ritchie gunned him from the bushes. That left one less to split with and made the thing better—for Ritchie.

"The kid paid off a couple of times, getting the dough from her stepmother. Now Charlotte put it all together and decided it was me. She cuts herself in. And in so doing, tells Ritchie about it. She's a little nuts about Ritchie. Ritchie sees what's going to happen when the old colonel goes to bat, so just as you say, by using his influence he gets them each to confess. After the colo-

nel and Beth were dead Charlotte would inherit—and guess who she'd marry? I give you three guesses."

"But how would they know the colonel would commit suicide?"

I knew damed well he wouldn't. Hell, I know people. That pudgy little colonel was a fighter. So I went over and whispered to Charlotte. I told her about shaved heads and electrodes, and priests, and the long walk from the death house to the chair.

She said her piece. "He didn't commit suicide. Ritchie killed him and put the gun in his hand. He stepped behind the portieres at the door. You boys busted in, then he stepped out when your backs were turned, like he'd just arrived. And it was Ritchie who took the potshot at you, Walsh, in the pergola. When you admitted the girl had been to see you, he got scared. He lifted stationery from your office and—"

"Little partner," I smirked at her. "Now they won't burn you!"

"Partners," grinned Swanson. "Maybe you can do half her stretch for her. Where are you going?"

I told him I was going upstairs to comfort Beth.

So I did.

THREE WOMEN AND A CORPSE

(Continued from page 43)

term in jail—because I couldn't think of anything that would make her any madder.

Then Kenny said: "I never saw so many stiffs around a place in my life, as there was here when the blow-off came. It was a massacre, no less."

I said: "I count three dead women and one corpse, that's all."

"How?"

"Mrs. Garr, Flo, and Betty. And Jackie Collins I count as a decent corpse. He was on the right side, even if he was a hustler."

"What about the others? Garr, and the rest of 'em?"

I said: "That's carrion, Kenny, and nothing else. People like that can't make a decent corpse."

Kenny agreed with me on that.

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